The Reception of Arab Women Writers in the West

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Declaration

I hereby declare that the dissertation, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctorate of Philosophy and entitled "The Reception of Arab Women Writers in the West", represents my own work and has not been previously submitted to this or any other institution for any degree, diploma or other qualification.

To my mother and father

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Abstract

This thesis explores the reception in the Anglophone West of the works of three Arab women writers Nawel el-Saadawi, Hanan al-Shaykh and Sahar Khalifa. The principal methodological tools are drawn from cultural theories of translation, methods that go beyond a narrow technical focus on accuracy and commensurability in translation. The focus is therefore not on textual analysis, but on (1) political events such as the Iranian revolution of 1979, (2) forms of expertise such as academics, critics, reviewers and translators, and (3) ideological trends, primarily Orientalism and feminism, which all affect the success or failure of reception of a translated text in the host culture. The thesis finds that both forms of expertise and political events play important roles in forging a horizon of expectation, primarily among readerships respecting the content of works which are deemed to be interesting. The principal aim of the thesis, however, is to subject the conventional wisdom, which heavily stresses the overwhelming importance of Orientalism in the reception of female Arab writers in the West, to serious scrutiny. To this end, the oeuvre (mostly fiction) of three prominent writers whose reception has been marked by controversies over Orientalism and feminism was chosen. The goal is not to replace the 'Orientalism' thesis with a simplistic feminism thesis: The present argument accepts that Orientalism has played an important role in the reception of the three writers, although in fractured and varied ways. However, I also argue that feminism has played an important and increasing role in literary reception, particularly in the case of Nawal el-Saadawi. The idea is that feminist expectations and concerns, in conjunction with political events, create a 'knowledge vacuum' among readerships which is then filled by particular, relevant texts. In other words, it is inadequate to shoehorn all forms of Western reception into a vague and hydra-like category of Orientalism. However, the argument does not lionize the feminist movement: I show how feminism is marked on the one hand by Orientalism – a standard claim – but also how feminism itself is limited by its concern for gender on the one hand, and forms of political conservatism on the other, especially on controversial issues in Middle East politics, such as Israel / Palestine. I show this last point particularly through my exploration of the reception of the work of Sahar Khalifa. In a broader sense, the thesis aims to indicate how cultural interaction between 'West' and 'East' is more complicated than monolithic and essentialist analyses would have us believe. The idea is to bolster readings of Edward Said which do not fall into this trap. Ultimately, such a reading points beyond the notion of nativism on the one side, and Eurocentrism on the other.

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

1.1 The topic and the research

This study explores the success of three major Arab women writers in the Anglo-American literary system. My point of departure, is to propose that there is much to learn from studying the exception to the rule that very few Arab male and female writers "make it" in the West. This thesis will look in detail at the reception of the writers who do succeed, and challenges the conventional wisdom with regard to the reason for their success.

Originally, my main interest was to understand the way Muslim and Arab people in general are represented in Western culture. With a personal background in translation studies I decided to look specifically at the literature of Arab women and the way in which their texts have been received in the West, on which little significant scholarship has been done,[1] partially, due to the factor that there has generally been limited interest on the part of translation studies in Arabic literature.

Since the publication in 1978 of Edward Said's *Orientalism,* few have ventured onto the terrain of Western representation of Arabs and Muslims without at least some

[1] A useful exception is Amal Amireh's work in Amal Amireh and Lisa Suahir Majaj, *Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writer* (New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc), 2000.

engagement with the problematic of Orientalism, which for many has become a standard theoretical tool. This thesis is no exception and indeed one of my primary goals became to try to evaluate the importance of Orientalism in the reception of Arab writing. I began my research by looking at primary source material consisting of discussions by academics and by non-academic literary critics on the value of the books for the Western reader, and the reasons why a given book might be successful. It became clear fairly early on that the standard wisdom among reviewers was that Arab female writings were attractive to the Western reader because of the image of the lives of Arab people they portrayed. In other words, it was repeatedly argued that these books appealed to Western prejudices. This material appeared to have a single message: these books were appealing to the Western reader's Orientalist prejudices. However, a hypothesis started to form in my thinking that such understandings, whilst containing significant elements of truth, were limited in various ways. The issue of feminism, which bulked large from the beginning among reviewers and readers, could not be so easily shoe-horned into the category of Orientalism, regardless of whether at certain points the form and content of feminist reception was determined by Orientalist stereotypes of gender in the Arab and Muslim world. In fact, the idea that all feminist responses were Orientalist started to seem like a reductive and catch-all explanation, which occasionally became so vague and all-encompassing as to explain nothing while purporting to explain everything. There was simply too much distance between feminists espousing universalist claims and Orientalist discourse conjuring with an irreducible ontological and epistemological difference between East and West, which raised doubts about the validity of the thesis that Orientalism was somehow responsible for the entire gamut of Western responses to

Arab female writing including feminism. It came to seem as if Western discourse was not simply a closed system, incommensurable with everything that is non-European, as the Foucauldian version of Edward Said's work proclaimed, but was a more complex object, not even always reducible to a hermetically sealed notion of the 'West'. This understanding, indeed, seemed to be a more profound understanding of Edward Said's intent in any case, in as much as he had always insisted that cultures were not bounded, monolithic, and unchanging, but developed through interaction and changed over time. If feminism complicated the reductive story of Orientalism, it had weaknesses and limitations of its own, especially in respect of economic and political dimensions of the texts that Western feminists analysed. My thesis did not become a glorification of universalism feminism. Nor, it turned out, did a purely 'idealist' reading of discourse do justice to forms of reception in the West: political events, forms of expertise, and even authorial presence complicated a story which was not simply governed by the purely theoretical precepts of Orientalism and feminism. The thesis therefore became an attempt to unravel these different influences, events and discourses, and thus to understand the shifting forms of Orientalism and feminism, and how they determined the reception of Arab female writing in the West – an attempt which turned out to question standard interpretations.

Having identified my sources of material and the potential dual role played by both Orientalism and feminism, along with socio-political change, I then turned to translation studies in order to analyse the material in theoretical terms. I decided to adopt a method within translation studies known as "the cultural approach", as opposed to the "linguistic

approach". While the latter adopts a text-orientated analysis looking at the text itself in simply linguistic terms, the former looks at the forces that affect the social environment of the culture receiving the foreign text: surely a more appropriate way of proceeding. While this approach is hardly new, and has received some critical attention, it still retains recuperable and valid elements appropriate to the methods and goals of this study.

The cultural approach to translation led me to Manipulation School and its major scholar Andre Lefevere in particular, as providing the most detailed analysis of why some texts are successful in entering literary systems and why others are not. This school's analysis includes considerations specific to the reception of translated texts and a significant part of Lefevere's model is the role played by conceptual forms of patronage, which includes ideology. Thus an analysis existed into which I could potentially situate the two discourses (Orientalism and feminism) I had come across in my original reading.

Adapting a cultural approach to translation also led me to reception theory, which put simply looks at the prejudices of readers when reading a book, describing it as the reader's "horizon of expectation"[2]. Without having looked at the material in more detail, it seemed clear that the potential role of Orientalism in explaining the reception of Arab female writing in the West could easily be the object of an application of the horizon theory.

[2] The term is from the work of Hans Robert Jauss, which I will be discussing further below.

1.2 Original reasons for choice of writers selected for analysis

The three women writers I have selected in order to achieve the above are the Egyptian Nawal el-Saadawi, the Lebanese writer Hanan al-Shaykh and the Palestinian Sahar Khalifa.

I naturally selected Nawal el-Saadawi principally because she is the first Arab writer, let alone Arab female writer, to have successfully entered the Western literary system.[3] Soon after her first English publication in 1980 she took on the unelected status of spokeswoman in the West for Arab women. The controversy that surrounds the reception of her work is reflected to a lesser extent in the reception of many other Arab writers.

My choice of Hanan al-Sheikh was based on the fact that she is clearly a good example of a successful Arab female author in the Western literary system who has achieved a mass readership and whose latest work has been published by a mainstream publisher.

Finally, Khalifa became my third choice because I was interested in looking at why an author who found considerable success with the publication of one of her books was not subsequently translated. In other words, she seemed on the surface to be a good source

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[3] Most commentators consider Najeeb Mahfouz, the Nobel Prize Laureate in Literature of 1988, to be the first Arab writer to successfully enter the Western literary system. Of course I am aware of the publicity and subsequent readership that is guarantied for a Nobel laureate. However, I would differ with the believe that Mahfouz is the first to enter the Western literary system as I would argue that el-Saadawi entered the Western literary system prior to 1988 with her work Woman at Point Zero, published in 1982.

for looking at whether the same factors could explain both success as well as limits imposed upon that success. In addition, the daily standard discourse of international politics, as opposed to the indirect political discourse of feminism, surrounds her work and she therefore appeared to be an author whose work could stand in analytical contrast to that of the other two authors.

I have decided to set out my analysis of relevant theory separately in chapter II, separate from the analysis of reactions to the work of the three authors in chapters III, IV and V. Not only does this increase clarity in itself but is also appropriate given that all three chapters looking at the authors will be based on the same sets of theory and analytical considerations. Setting out the theory therefore avoids repetition.

1.3 Structure of PhD

Chapter 2

The theory I set out in this chapter forms the basis for my analysis of the material looked at in the subsequent chapters.

In drawing mainly upon cultural theory (polysystem theory, Manipulation School, and reception theory), I seek to show that the reception into the Western receiving culture of the works I look at is not simply a linguistic phenomenon: it is a complex phenomenon that involves a number of factors varied in nature such as ideology and discourse, the

role played by specific sets of people such as translators and the effect of political events. In broad terms, these theories are the most profound analytical tools available to us in approaching the present topic.

As part of my analysis of the Manipulation School I will draw heavily upon Lefeveres' notions of "patronage" and "categories of expertise" which form his "control factor". The notion of "patronage" will help me to place the discourse of Orientalism and the ideology of feminism into a theoretical framework. His "categories of expertise" and "poetics" will help me to ascribe theoretical roles to the reviewers and academics upon whose writings I will be drawing in subsequent chapters.

My analysis of the notion of the reader's "horizon of expectation" will provide me with a framework within which to locate Orientalism as an important factor in explaining the Western reactions to the first two writers considered, and the importance of political events in particular in relation to the third writer considered.

I then turn to post-colonial theory and Orientalism, setting out the main principles of the theory and presenting it as a form of ideological patronage within Lefevere's sense of the term, and as a discourse affecting both Lefevere's categories of expertise and the readership's "horizon of expectation".

I end the chapter looking at the interaction between feminism and Third World women's writing. This enables me to achieve a number of goals in the subsequent chapters.

Firstly, I will argue that feminism is the most important form, albeit to different degrees, of ideological patronage for the first two writers considered. In particular, chapters III and IV will show how this ideology played different roles for the two writers considered. Secondly, I will demonstrate that as with Orientalism, feminism is a discourse affecting the readership's "horizon of expectation".

It will become clear in later chapters how I consider the way in which Orientalism and feminism coexist in the reception of the first two writers considered.

Chapter 3

Chapter III, looking at the success of Nawal el-Saadawi, will explore the interaction of a variety of factors which I consider to be behind her successful reception. There are four main factors underpinning the structure of the chapter.

Firstly, I look at some of el-Saadawi's early writing and the context in which it was written. The purpose of doing so will be to provide a broad contextual and empirical basis on which to base my subsequent evaluation and criticism of some of the ways in which she has been received.

Secondly, because of her iconic nature and the intensely feminist context of her initial success, I begin by setting out a number of considerations related to the feminist context through which she entered the Western literary system in 1980, and other considerations

related to her personally that helped her to achieve iconic status in the eyes of Western feminists in the subsequent two decades. I do so above all in order to make clear that the context for her success was always a feminist one.

Thirdly, and related to the first point, el-Saadawi's success has traditionally been presented by referring to the Orientalist lens through which her work was ostensibly received. Being the standard explanation, and given that in light of the feminist context of her reception I believe it is inadequate as a complete explanation of her success, it is worth setting this out before proceeding with the rest of my analysis which builds upon this explanation.

Finally, the chronological nature of her success, coupled with a shift in the Orientalist-feminist balance means that I have set out my presentation of her work and my analysis of reactions to it on a chronological basis. Within each chronological step I split up my analysis according to a distinction between reactions that I argue were Orientalist in nature, and those which were influenced by other factors.

The overall purpose of this approach is to show how the nature of the reception of her work shifted over time. In reaching my final conclusion on this point, I will acknowledge that the way in which I have interpreted the nature of some of the material is of course open to discussion, and I will therefore address the main possible objection to the way in which I have interpreted the material.

It will be evident that I have devoted a large part of the thesis to the el-Saadawi chapter. This is because of the large number of her translated works and the fact that far more critique is available for analysis, which is in turn an indication of her significance in debating 'East' - 'West' interaction.

Chapter 4

Chapter IV, dealing with the success of Hanaan al-Shaykh, looks at the way in which a number of varied factors can come together to underpin a foreign writer's success. In contrast to the other two authors I look at, both of whose success can be explained through two dominating factors, al-Shaykh's success is to be explained by a large number of factors which I will argue hold equal importance.

Having set out a summary of her major work and the themes contained therein, I will look at six varied factors that I believe have contributed to her success in the West. The reaction to her work is thus a good example of the way in which the Western literary system, as a differentiated patronage system in Lefereve's terms, can at times accommodate a complex array of factors in embracing the work of a new foreign author.

Looking at reviews and critiques of al-Shaykhs' work, I will argue that, as with el-Saadawi, Orientalism and feminism affected her readers' beliefs and assumptions. I will look at whether it is possible to decide which of these two discourses dominate reactions to her work. In looking at four additional factors ranging from how the topics of her

writing brought her thematically close to other popular authors in the Anglophone literary world, to the role played by a specific political context, I will also hypothesise about whether such factors also affected the readerships' 'horizons of expectation' and if so, to what extent they can be viewed as further crucial factors in explaining her success.

In reaching a conclusion on the way in which these multifarious factors came together to ensure her success with a broad readership, I will consider to what extent that success is ultimately due to the broad marketability of her work. Can al-Shaykh's success be a prime example of the role played by one of Lefevere's conceptual categories of patronage, namely that of economics?

Chapter 5

In the final chapter, I aim to explore the reception of Sahar Khalifa's. Khalifa published a single work in English. This clearly stands in contrast to the other two writers who had many books translated. Nonetheless, Khalifa's single translation constitutes a successful entry into the Western literary system for three reasons: the reviews of the book were numerous and positive, she was marketed on both sides of the Atlantic and the book has been included on many academic readings lists.

In contrast to both other writers I examine, Khalifa's success is not dependent on either an Orientalist or feminist discourse. Neither the reader nor her patrons can be argued to have been influenced to any significant extent by either of these two ideologies. A

review of reactions to her book shows a hybrid discourse consisting mainly of anthropological and political considerations, with the latter falling squarely within some of the theory I will set out in chapter II in relation to the role politics can play in shaping a readership's horizon of expectation.

I will also look at some factors that may explain why her success was not greater. Can it in part be explained through the absence of both an Orientalist and/or feminist discourse to support her work? What role did the extensive politicisation of her work play in persuading or dissuading key categories of patronage to consider supporting her work?

Conclusion

In the conclusion I will draw together the strands of argument presented that Orientalism cannot be conceived as the only factor in determining the successful reception of female Arab writers in the West, albeit perhaps modest, the larger significance of this arguments involves an insistence on the need to take into account a multiplicity of factors when debating authorial reception in general. I show the complex ways in which feminism – sometimes in collaboration but sometimes in tension with Orientalism – must be taken into account, especially over time. I do so outside of any naïve celebration of feminism, which I show to erase political, economic and anti-imperial themes in Arab writing.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Background

2.1 The aim and structure of this Chapter

The aim of this chapter is to outline the theoretical insights that I draw upon in my empirical analysis in subsequent chapters, regarding the reception of Arab women writers in the Western literary system.

Three theories are of interest, to various degrees, to the focus of this thesis: the polysystem theory, the Manipulation School and reception theory. In contrast to the fixation that New Criticism has with the interpretation of a text, proponents of these three theories believe that it is the whole complex social systems in which literary items are produced, mediated, received and post-processed that need to be analysed in order to achieve two main goals: to produce broader and richer interpretations by scholars of the meaning of a given text and to enhance an understanding of the fortunes of translated texts in their host culture. In the present context, this approach can be used to analyse the factors which facilitate or hinder the production of texts by the Western literary system, and the reception of Arab women writers' works therein.

As proponents of these theories have incorporated the Russian Formalists' systems thinking into the discipline known as translation studies, I will begin by sketching a brief outline of Systems theory (section 2.2). I will then look at Even Zohar's polysystem theory which was the first to incorporate systems thinking into translation studies, and

which concluded that it is the condition of the host literary system that determines the reception or rejection of literary works (section 2.3).

In section 2.4 I will then turn to the work of Lefevere, a major scholar of the Manipulation School, who in expanding on the use of systemic thinking focused on the relationships between all elements of a literary system and power, a relationship he described through his concept of "control factor". For Lefevere, this concept contains two principal elements: "patronage"[4] and categories of expertise, i.e. "professionals"[5]. His insight into patronage is key to the present study, as it will allow me to use his notion of ideology as a an "element"[6] of patronage as a major explanatory factor in understanding the fortune of Arab female literary works in the Western literary system. I will use his notion of ideology to argue that feminism, which I turn to in detail at the end of chapter II, is the principle factor in explaining the aforementioned fortunes. In turn, his insight into "categories of expertise" and his use of the notion of "poetics" will enable me to analyse the process of reproduction and representation by key figures in Western literary systems (academics and reviewers) of translated female Arab writers' texts.

Having outlined Lefevere's analysis, I will set out the most important aspects of Jauss' notion of a "horizons of expectation", a concept that argues for the existence of, and

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[4] Andre Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (London: Routledge, 1992), 15.
[5] Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, 14.
[6] Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, 16.

explains the forces behind, readers' shared assumptions when reading any given text (section 2.5). This model will then serve to introduce both the theory of Orientalism (as a particular form of post colonial theory) as well as political events such as key forces shaping Western academic and non-academic readers' "horizons of expectation" when receiving Arab female writers' literary works. In discussing Orientalism with an eye on Jauss' theory, I will also present it as a form of ideological patronage within Lefevere's sense of the term (sections 2.6 and 2.7).

As mentioned above, I conclude the chapter on el-Saadawi in section 2.8 by setting out feminism as a form of ideological patronage in Lefevere's sense of the term. In so doing, I will argue that the feminist approach to Arab women's writing is argued by critics to have failed to transcend an Orientalist discourse which for many decades has dominated Western perceptions of all aspects of Oriental culture, including its writing.

2.2 -The Incorporation of Systems Thinking into Translation Studies

The notion of a "system" in literary criticism was introduced by the Russian Formalist Tynjanov (1929) and is defined as "a multi-layered structure of elements which relate to and interact with each other".[7] On the relation between literature and other systems in culture he argues that literature "is both autonomous and heteronomous, i.e., that it is both self-regulated and conditioned by other systems".[8] Focusing on the notion of

[7] Mona Baker, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Translation Studies* (London: Routledge, 1998), 176.
[8] Itamar Even-Zohar, "Polysystem Theory" in *Journal of Poetics Today* 11, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 30, 9-52.

heteronomy Boris Ejxenbaum, Tyjanov's closest partner, regarded the analysis of "the kind of relations obtaining between the laws which govern the production of literary texts, as extractable from these texts, and the forces which generate these laws, promote them, or make them disappear"[9] as the way forward for understanding the convoluted network of relations that condition the production of literary works.

A more satisfactory way of looking at the notion of "elements" in the above definition is to think of those elements as different parts of, or systems within, society, and which together make up "society" or "culture". One of these systems is referred to as the "literary system". Lefevere describes it thus:

> (The literary system is) a contrived system because it consists both of objects (books) and human beings who read, write and rewrite books. [It] is not a deterministic system. Rather, the system acts as a series of "constraints", in the fullest sense of the word, on the reader, writer and rewriter....[10]

Examples of other systems would be "law", "education" and the various sciences. According to this theory, these systems interact with each other and cannot be analysed independently of each other. As I shall set out in some detail below, this interaction or interplay is analysed by Lefevere through his concept of a "control factor", the role of which is to ensure harmony between a given system, the other systems and the overall "culture" or "social environment" in which they are located.

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[9] Ibid., 30.
[10] Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, 12.

One part of a literary system is the process of translation. By incorporating systemic thinking into translation studies, scholars can look at a translated text as "the object of study as a verbal text within the network of literary and extra-literary signs in both the source and target cultures". [11] By relating the object of study to "extra-literary signs", they relate translation to non-literary institutions that construct culture and social canonisation, such as political and economic institutions. By relating the object of study to "literary signs" they relate the process of translation to literary trends in a receiving culture, for they regard a translated text as a presentation of both the ideological and literary trends of its culture.

2.3 The Polysystem Theory

Even Zohar, the founder of the polysystem theory and the first to incorporate systemic thinking into translation studies, focuses his work on the relationship between a translated text attempting to enter a literary system and the condition of that system, stating: "translation is no longer a phenomenon whose nature and borders are given once and for all, but an activity dependent on the relations within a certain cultural system".[12]

He adopts what is called a "target-oriented approach".[13] By this he means that the nature of the receiving literary system, that is to say its position, strength, and historical depth,

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[11] Edwin Gentzler, Foreword in Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere, *Translation, History and Culture* (London: Routledge 1990), xi.
[12] Itamar Even-Zohar, *Journal of Poetics Today* , 51.
[13] Baker., 178.

will determine whether or not a text will enter that system in translated form. In other words, if the receiving literary system is predisposed to receiving foreign texts, then a text is more likely to be received than in a less receptive system.[14]

He goes on to argue that in less receptive systems, once a text has managed to penetrate the system, it will usually be located in a peripheral position.[15] By peripheral position, I understand Even-Zohar to be referring to a position which reflects the fact that the work is not a key piece of writing and that it has attracted a limited readership. He argues that an exception to such works ending up in a peripheral position can occur when a "vacuum" exists in the "centre" of the receiving system. A vacuum can exist inside any category, such as novels[16], academia or a mixture of the two.[17] I will argue below that some of the success of Arab female writers in being translated into English and finding a non-peripheral position in the Western literary system is because their work filled both literary and academic vacuums simultaneously.

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[14] The British system undoubtedly qualifies as a less receptive system with only 3 to 4 percent of literature read being translated literature. Peter France states that, "the English-speaking countries, secure or complacent in their linguistic dominance, today translate proportionally far less than their neighbours." Peter France, ed., *The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation* (Oxford New York: Oxford University Press 2000), xix.

[15] Even - Zohar, 48.

[16] Even -Zohar argues that translated works can gain access to a literary market if they succeed in introducing a new genre into the dominant poetics (which I will define below) or "propose a novel function for literature" ibid., 22. A good example is the positive review of the Dutch novel *A Course of Time*, in *The International Fiction Review* (1978, 1:67- 68). In this review the novel is praised for its "worthy addition to the fast growing canon of experimental and heterodox narratives" which as Hermans argues is less developed in English literature. Theo Hermans, *The Manipulation of Literature: Studies in literary Translation* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1985), 206.

[17] In his article "The Old Guard", Stephen Moss discusses the static nature of the British literary scene, he argues that the success of Amis, Rushdie and McEwan in the early 1970s was due to the " new impetus [they gave] to the literary novel, helped by proper marketing and impresarios such as Malcolm Bradbury." He adds that to him it seems that in Britain during the 1950s, 1960s and even the 1980s there was a desire for novels that would provide excitement and challenge rather than comfort: "There was perceived to be a vacuum, which emerging writers such as Amis, McEwan and the startling new talent of Rushdie were quickly able to fill." Stephen Moss, "The Old Guard," *The Guardian*, Monday 6 August 2001.

For present purposes, Even-Zohar's key insight is that a translated text must be identified as an interdependent entity within a literary system in the same way that a "norm" such as a "genre of text" or a "literary taste" must also be identified and analysed in an interdependent way. Only having identified the text as such an entity, is it then possible to analyse the interaction between the text and other entities, such "norms" which, he often concluded, involved a type of dependence by the text on those norms.

However, this focus on the internal condition of, and factors at play in, a literary system had a short-coming. It ignored the importance of also analysing the way in which a literary system interacts with other systems in the culture in which it is located. Although Even Zohar incorporated the notion of the existence of the interaction between different systems within a culture, he did not address the issue of how factors originating externally to the literary system, such as ideologies and political theories, affect the way in which a literary system functions. An example of this would be how he explained hegemonic cultures' lack of interest in translating texts from other cultures by looking only at the high level of literary development of these hegemonic cultures' literary systems. Lefevere went further and built on Even-Zohar's analysis by incorporating a cultural as well political analysis, when looking at what he took to be the superior attitudes of hegemonic cultures.

In the light of this, I consider Manipulation Theory to be a breakthrough for translation studies in that it expands the analysis of the factors influencing the success which a

translated text achieves in its literary system to include the various ideological forces at play in society. It is to that school of thought that I now turn.

2.4 Manipulation Theory

2.4.1 The theory in summary

The School of Manipulation Theory took the approach of applying systemic thinking to the process of translation one step further. Created in the Netherlands and Israel, The Manipulation School puts forward the view that translation should be studied as part of a whole system. They foresee that "neither the word, nor the text, but the culture becomes the operational 'unit' of translation".[18] This approach helped to widen Translations Studies by taking into account the role played by power, censorship and institutions when looking at which factors affect the process of translation. It looked at the means of constructing, directing and maintaining a socio-cultural system, and identified the people and institutions that control those means. Lefevere is one of the main proponents of this theory.

In *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame,* Lefevere is critical of the fact that scholars involved in literary analysis limit their explanation about the

[18] Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere, eds. *Translation, History and Culture* (London: Routledge, 1990), 8.

success of a particular text to the text's intrinsic value and of the fact that they use "vague notions", such as that it is a book's "fate" to be successful or not, or that a particular success or failure is part of the "the course of history". Lefevere maintains that such a simplistic explanation cannot be applied to complicated events such as publishing houses' sudden interest in the 1970s and 1980s to republish certain classics (for example feminist classics originally written in the 1930s and 1940s) or such as the rejection or appraisal of a certain figure at a particular time (for example the neglect of the works of Heinrich Heine in German literature between 1933 and 1945). He argues that interest in, or neglect of, a text is related not so much to "the intrinsic value" of a work but rather to the cultural laws that govern the production and distribution of knowledge in society.[19]

In order to overcome such simplistic explanations and in seeking to understanding the norms and constraints that govern the interplay between systems within a culture, Lefevere developed the following framework of analysis: a literary system is governed by an overall "control factor", the aim of which is to ensure that the literary system within any given society functions in accordance both with other systems within that culture, as well as with the overall social ideology dominant in the culture. Having set out the following brief summary of the constituent elements of this control factor, I will look at each element in more detail.

The first main element of the control factor is the concept of "patronage", which is made up of one or more of three different elements: ideology, economics and status. The

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[19] Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, 1.

second main element is made up of specific categories of people fulfilling specific roles within the literary system, for example translators and critics. He calls these categories of people "expertise". These categories of people (who I will refer to as "categories of expertise") consciously play a role of reinforcing a pre-existing poetics/ideology through the way in which they work. Lefevere uses the concept of "poetics" to explain what processes people falling into his category of "expertise" follow to ensure that a literary text is accepted into the literary system.

2.4.2.1 Control element 1: "Patronage"

According to Lefevere, patronage "is to be understood as the powers (persons or institutions) which help or hinder the writing, reading and rewriting of literature".[20] Lefevere makes clear that this "patronage" changes over time, varying from the authority of aristocrats or religious figures in the past to a wider circle mainly consisting of institutions, economic powers and publishing houses in present times.

The above makes it sound as if Lefevere is referring only to people or institutions when he refers to patronage. However in his writing he also speaks of "elements of

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[20] Lefevere, 17. According to Gentzler's understanding of Lefevere, patronage means "any kind of force that can be influential in encouraging or discouraging, even censoring, works of literature". Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere, xvi.

patronage".[21] These "elements" are not people or institutions but instead are conceptual categories which he says motivate people or institutions in their actions. In using the term "patronage" I may therefore be referring to people/institutions and/or these conceptual elements of patronage. Lefevere identifies three distinct conceptual elements of patronage: ideology, economics and status. At any given time, one or more of these will motivate the person or institution acting as a form of patronage. Lefevere states that people falling into the categories of "expertise" identified under the second element of the control factor as well as persons or institutions involved in the patronage of any given literary work, draw upon one or more of these conceptual elements of patronage in carrying out their role within a literary system.

Before turning to the conceptual elements of patronage in more detail and for the sake of completeness at this point, it should be noted that Lefevere's definition of patronage is further developed through identifying two overall forms of patronage that draw in different ways on both the personalised/institutionalised aspect of patronage, as well as on the conceptual elements of differentiated and undifferentiated patronage. I will turn to this aspect of his definition after looking at the various conceptual elements of patronage.

(i) Ideology as patronage

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[21] Lefevere, 16.

For present purposes, the most important element in Lefevere's list of conceptual elements that can form patronage is ideology. In searching for a non-reductive definition of ideology, which although paying attention to non-ideological structural factors, still accords ideas some explanatory power, I will adopt Jameson's definition of ideology, *"that grill work of form, convention, and belief which orders our actions".*[22] I

I shall be arguing that feminism constitutes a clear example of an ideological form of patronage involved in the reception of female Arabic texts within the Western literary system. I shall also be arguing, with reference to Jameson's above definition, that "Orientalism" as a discourse[23] can be viewed as an ideological form of patronage for the purpose of Lefevere's model.

Lefevere argues that ideology functions as a prop for the maintenance and stability of society and those in power: the ideological element of patronage will motivate experts within the literary system to, for example, commission the translation of a work if they believe that the work's ideology conforms to the receiving culture's own ideology.[24] For target-orientated scholars, ideology in this sense functions as a parameter that guides authoritative institutions by encouraging these institutions and their associated experts to

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[22] Ibid., 16.

[23] According to Shelly Walia, discourse is "any speech, writing or belief through which the world can be known and understood. In the Foucaldian sense discourse contains statements which are governed by unspoken rules yielding a language of power co-ordinated through knowledge… A determining and defining authority is created through the power of discourse which has the underpinnings of cultural imperialism." Shelly Walia, *Postmodern Encounters: Edward Said and the Writing of History* (Cambridge: Icon, 2001), 77-78.

[24] For example, in the run up to International Women's Day on 8 March 2004, the Marxist newspaper The *Daily Star*, with its inherent interest in Third World issues, stated that it would "publish a variety of articles on Lebanese women today and organizations that work on women's issue". *Daily Star*, 8 March 2004.

develop certain interpretive methods and to preclude those same experts from developing others. These structures determine what is or is not a valid text and/or context. Thus, within any literary system, the ideological element acts as "a constraint on the choice and development of both form and subject matter".[25] It should be noted that in speaking of choice, Lefevere is referring to the patron (who selects the work in the first place), and in speaking of development he is referring to the "expert", defined below (who affects the way in which the book is translated and presented).

(ii) Economics and status as patronage

Lefevere's second and third conceptual elements involved in his notion of "patronage" are that of economics (the profit motive and the need to provide financial stability for writers and rewriters) and that of status ("acceptance of patronage implies integration into a certain support group and its life style").[26]

As an example of the first (ideological) and second (economic) elements coming together to dominate as a form of patronage, Schiffrin identifies the Western publishing house as a "patron" in its own right and argues that the "ideology" of the publisher will mostly be synonymous with notions of marketability. [27] In his article "The Corporatisation of Publishing", he argues that the decision of what to publish is no longer taken by editors but rather by "ostensible publishing committees". The publishing

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[25] Lefevere., 19.
[26] Lefevere., 16.
[27] Andre Schiffrin, "The Corporatisation of Publishing , " *The Nation* 262, no.1(1996): 29- 32.

committee's decision, dependent on financial and marketing advice, is made above all with a view to a book's possible short and long-term sales. They will look to the fame of an author or his or her previous sales, a process perceptively described by the Spanish newspaper *El Pais* as "market censorship".[28] Consequently, the chances of new authors and new critical viewpoints being published in the major publishing houses are very slim. Referring specifically to UK publishing houses, Sutherland stresses that they generally consider the Anglophone market to include both sides of the Atlantic, for the simple reason that a successful marketing strategy on both sides of the Atlantic will generate increased sales as compared to a marketing strategy that focuses only on one side.[29]

Fiction with a firm emphasis on entertainment sells and consequently novels respecting this law of the market tend to succeed. The American literary market tends towards the intensive commercialisation of a book, through low prices and appealing titles, and concentrates on fiction for entertainment. The domination of the American invention of the bestseller has had a huge impact on British publishing. Both the rise of new distribution outlets (such as railway bookshops which tend to concentrate on popular fiction genres such as gothic, romantic, science-fiction or detective novels rather than more sophisticated literary genres) and the massive impact the mass media has on readers have both contributed to this effect. This tendency towards popular fiction and

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[28] Ibid., 29.
[29] John A. Sutherland, *Fiction and the fiction Industry* (University of London: the Athlone Press, 1978), 63.

the emphasis on best-sellers has been both encouraged and confirmed by the publishing industry. Publishers' conglomerates, controlling 80% of the market, tend to adopt a profit-centred ideology in which the traditional role of publishers as distributors of culture is abandoned in favour of the application of market theory, in which the major concern becomes catering for the readers rather than educating them. The more analytical and avant-garde forms of writing are thus left to small and non mainstream publishers.

It is important to note that not all publishers are in favour of this system. This state of "starvation" of serious fiction is, according to Schiffrin, a result of publishers' profit-centred ideology both in the United States and Britain. He asserts that owners of conglomerates, controlling 80% of the publishing market, demand profits from the publication of books comparable to those they accept from their newspaper business. To meet these expectations publishers "have drastically changed the nature of what they publish. The smaller books - serious fiction, art history, criticism - have all but disappeared from the lists of the major houses. The emphasis has been shifted to pay huge best sellers".[30]

I will be drawing upon this second element of conceptual patronage in conjunction with the first element of ideology, in order to help explain the way in which writings by the authors on whom I focus below are affected by the notion of patronage.

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[30] Schiffrin, "The Corporatization of Publishing", 29.

(iv) Differentiated and undifferentiated patronage

As stated above, Lefevere identifies two overall forms of patronage that draw upon the personalised/institutionalised and conceptual forms of patronage in different ways: differentiated and undifferentiated patronage. Lefevere explicitly defines undifferentiated patronage but only implicitly defines differentiated patronage. According to Lefevere, *undifferentiated* patronage is present in a society where ideology, the economy and the granting and withdrawal of social status are controlled by one sole patron. Lefevere cites examples of literary systems in earlier times, when aristocrats and religious figures had control over society's ideology and supported writers and rewriters financially (and thereby in their social status). In modern times the same situation still exists in totalitarian countries or in countries that maintain their ideology by means of a dominant religion. According to Lefevere, the role of literature in such cultures is "directed at preserving the stability of the social system as a whole, and the literary production that is accepted and actively promoted within that social system".[31] Works of translation in this case do not gain access to the system unless they apply to the "authoritative myths of a given cultural formation" in both their ideological and poetical forms.[32]

By implication, it seems that Lefevere is saying that we can expect *differentiated* patronage to be present in a society in which ideology, the economy and the granting

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[31] Lefevere, 17.
[32] *Ibid., 17.*

and withdrawal of social status are *not* controlled by *one sole patron*. As a result, in such societies the three conceptual elements of patronage can happily, though not necessarily, function independently of each other. For example, on ideological grounds, a publishing house with a particular ideology may take on the publication of a work that it knows will not lead to substantial financial profit. It can do so because its patronage is not circumscribed by economic or status-bound factors controlled by any other institution. Similarly, when a publishing house is pursuing financial gain or survival as a priority, it can take that decision independently of any other institutions' interest or demand. Looking at the Western literary system, I would argue that it is clear that Lefevere's notion of differentiated patronage is present in such systems.

It is also clear that in differentiated patronage societies the translation of a piece of writing is more likely to gain access to the market than in a society where one sole patron controls all three elements ("undifferentiated patronage"). This is because the former type of society will allow for writing based on different ideologies and writing addressing a wide range of themes and perspectives to enter the literary system.

2.4.2.2 Control elements 2: "Expertise" and "poetics"

Lefevere's second element, "expertise", is located purely within the literary system. This element is made of groups of people with expertise, such as academics, teachers of

literature, critics, reviewers, translators and other rewriters.[33] Through his inclusion of these categories of people in his system, Lefevere stresses that these groups, who at first might appear to be playing a secondary or minor role in the overall literary system, actually do have significant power to influence that system. In the remainder of this section I will refer to these people as rewriters. Having looked at the notion of "poetics", I will turn to specific examples of rewriters below.

Particularly through his use of the term "rewriter", Lefevere is arguing that these people are influenced in the way in which they carry out their work by two main factors: by patronage (the persons, institutions and conceptual forms of patronage which together lead to the commissioning or publication of literary works) and by the unspoken rules of "poetics". For Lefevere, "poetics" is a literary standard system which, "consists of two components: one is an inventory of literary devices, genres, motifs, prototypical characters and situations, symbols; the other a concept of what the role of literature is, or should be, in the society at large".[34]

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[33] Amireh and Majaj call this category of people "design professionals" and conclude that they fill a role similar to that of "cultural specialists and intermediaries working in the film, television, music, advertising, fashion and consumer culture industries". As "literary intermediaries", they "not only determine the availability and physical appearance of a book but also shape textual means". Amal Amireh and Lisa Suahir Majaj, *Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writer* (New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc, 2000), 5.

[34] Lefevere, 23. Poetics according to C. Bladick's definition in the Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms, is "the general principles of poetry or literature in general, or the theoretical study of these principles. As a body of theory, poetics is concerned with the distinctive features of poetry (or literature as a whole), with its languages, forms, genres, and modes of composition." Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

For Lefevere, rewriters "adapt works of literature until they can be claimed to correspond to the poetics and the ideology of their time".[35] Thus, Lefevere concludes that the rewriting of a translated text is undertaken according to the dominant concept of what literature should (be allowed to) be - its poetics – and of what society should (be allowed to) be – its ideology.[36]

It seems clear to me that when Lefevere speaks of poetics reacting to a concept of what the role of literature is (or should be) in society at large, this means that those involved in a system of poetics are reacting to dominant ideologies within society, whatever they may be. For example, experts' seeking to bring into a Western literary system a given Arab text will draw upon the dominant discourse in their own society dealing with Arab culture. In most Western cultures, as I will argue below, this will be an Orientalist discourse. Consequently, separating out the concept of ideology from poetics appears to

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[35] Lefevere, 16. Below I will outline the main points of the reception theory which holds that any reader of a text brings to the reading process a "horizon of expectation". My understanding of this term is very similar to my understanding of the concept of poetics: for example, I would argue that a specific genre of novel as referred to in Lefevere's concept of poetics, is similar if not identical to the way in which the reception theory argues that a reader is predisposed to reading a particular type of novels. A further example of such a connection would be that a "motif" in Lefevere's term within poetics is comparable to the notion of a political horizon of expectation.

[36] Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame,* 14. In her article "The response to translated literature - A 'sad example'", Vanderauwera relates the semi-failure of the reception of the Dutch novel in the English language market to the stylistic element of poetics (as defined above). She asserts that the target English reader "appears to be particularly sensitive to any kind of deviation from modern, standard and idiomatic English prose" Ria Vanderauwera, "The Response to Translated Literature. A Sad Example," in Theo Hermans, ed., *The Manipulation of Literature* 1985), 202, 184-205. She adds that incompatibility in style, mode, imagery and other literary procedures were major hindrances in the appreciation of the Dutch novel by the English literary system. In the context of discussing this issue of stylistic compatibility between different systems of poetics, Lefevere argues that many systems of poetics will be incompatible. Given that readers in a receiving culture tend to expect that certain literary parameters are respected and therefore reject any deviation from them, two very different systems of poetics will rarely allow a text to move successfully between each other. Lefevere points out that this incompatibility can serve to ensure that an established system of poetics retains its superiority *vis a vis* another system of poetics located within a different literary system in a different culture. Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, 26.

be a formal analytical exercise rather than of a reflection of the two notions being somehow separated from each other in the minds of individuals working within a literary system.

This connection that Lefevere creates between, on the one hand, the "re-writing" process, which helps to create poetics in a given literary system and on the other hand ideologies at play in the society at large within which the system of poetics is located, is a connection upon which I will draw on a number of occasions in this thesis. My overall argument will be that it is the *ideology* of the host Western culture that most affects the way an Arab novel is reacted to by those involved in the processes related to "poetics" (reviewers, translators, marketing). This is important as it means that the more realist fictional writing that characterises the Arab novel, as compared to the dominant genre of non-realist fictional writing that is prevalent in the mainstream West, *does* gain access to the Western mass readership market. If it were not ideology but rather a simple focus on the literary genre aspect of poetics as defined above that affected the review, translation and marketing process, such novels would never successfully gain access. A key example of this will be my analysis in chapter III of the way in which the feminist aspect of el-Sadaawi's work is highlighted in order to compensate for her writing style, which is often openly criticised.

Before looking at the principal categories of rewriters, it is important to note Lefevere's comment on why rewriters almost inevitably ensure that a new text conforms to the poetics in the host literary system ("host poetics"). Lefevere argues that this tendency

results from the "conservative nature of literature" which automatically renders any literary system conservative.[37] Critics and academics "codify" the various forms of literary product (novels, poetry, etc.), by which Lefevere means "the selection of certain types of current practice and the exclusion of others". When this selection of "literary products" has taken place, Lefevere states that they are "canonised"[38] into the literary system through the processes involved in the various forms of recognition of a text, for example through repeated reviews in the academic world or through repeated inclusion on an academic syllabus.

With this noted, Lefevere identifies three principal categories of rewriters:

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[37] When reflecting on the notion of a literary system being inherently conservative, (Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame,* 20), it is of interest to turn to some of the thoughts of Dani Cavallaro. In *Critical and Cultural Theory*, Cavallro sets out to show how the world is presented to us through what he calls "cultural commodities", that is works of art including literature, which help us to experience its reality. He argues that Western cultures seek to facilitate the way in which cultural commodities are presented to society and argues that in the West this process ultimately seeks to maintain a sort of cultural unity in the way in which reality is represented. For example, literature, no matter how diverse in its origin and style, will always be presented in a way that ultimately helps to maintain a sense of cultural unity through which reality is understood. He calls this aim a "unified agenda". Cavallero relates this agenda to the broader notion of what he calls "the Western realistic technique", which tends to adapt the subjective representation of reality contained in texts to a different and equally subjective version of reality preferred by Western cultures. He stresses that in making this adaptation, those cultures conceal the ideological and cultural codes and conventions that inform the culture's version of reality and the way in which those cultures select the text. Cavallaro makes clear that as much as those making this adaptation would like to believe that the process of adaptation has brought the previously subjective reality closer to an objective Western reality, an objective reality will always remain unattainable. This is precisely because any such reality is presented through the inherently subjective nature of cultural commodities, represented as they are through subjective social and cultural codes and conventions. Cavallaro argues that part of the mechanics of achieving the unified agenda involves sustaining the representation of cultural commodities through repetition. For example, the language used to represent a text to the readership will be repetitive and will be based on ideological and cultural codes and conventions. Dani Cavallaro. *Critical and Cultural Theory* (London: Athlone, 2001).

[38] Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame,* 27.

(i) Translators

Lefevere argues that translators play a controlling role in the system of poetics through a number of means, including by being able to render a translated text far more "politically correct" than the original version, for example, by omitting or substituting words of racist nature.[39] In chapter III, I will provide an example in which the translator of el-Saadawi's chooses to water down the political tone of the novel in order to make it more compliant with the reader's expectations.

(ii) Reviewers

Lefevere's method focuses on reviewers as key actors in the system of poetics. This is mirrored in the work of New Reception Studies scholars who believe that an analysis of reviews is an important aid in understanding the reception of literary works.[40] Reviews therefore function as a vital source of evidence in my analysis below.

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[39] Lefevere gives as an example the translation of the memoirs of Anna Frank into German (Lefevere, Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame, 59 -72).

[40] Scholars interested in understanding the reception of literary works in the literary market analyse reviews as "the only extant written body of reactions to a work" (Brown, 1994:89). By means of these reviews they analyse both the points of interest in or rejection of a particular work and attempt to understand the review's literary system against which the new work is evaluated. In looking at reviewers' reactions to the works of the authors on which focus, I agree with this interpretation of the role and importance of reviews. Kaat, another scholar, who pays significant attention to the role of reviewers states that: "few reviewers can determine what sort of information the reader gets on a particular book, information which is highly dependent on their own personal tastes, their social-economic position and alliances, and their individual aesthetic literary value system" Jacques A. Kaat, "Reception-Sociological Study of the Reception of Dutch Twentieth Century Fictional Prose in Translation in Great Britain (1970-1983) in Relation to the Dutch and English Literary Canon." (Ph.D. diss., The University of Hull, 1987, 229). What is of interest in Kaat's comment is, his reference to the considerable power a reviewer exercises over cultural production. By their selection of particular works and their omission of others, reviewers, one can argue, are in control of determining the limits within which a reader is introduced to a foreign culture.

Lefevere argues that reviewers have a two-fold effect on a translated text. They will highlight certain parts of the text or will focus on a particular aspect of a writer's character, and will make that selection with conscious reference to the host society's existing ideology or belief-system and with reference to what they believe to be readers' prejudices. I will argue in chapter III that el-Saadawi's reviewers' awareness of the feminist preferences of their readership means that the reviewers at times choose to concentrate more on the feminist, rather than the socialist, aspect of el-Sadaawi's work.

Furthermore, if they believe that aspects of the writer's personal character renders the text less attractive to the readership, or particular parts of the text are too challenging for the host literary system from a political or ideological viewpoint, they will consciously ignore those elements. This power of selection and even veto allows reviewers to act as a key element in Lefevere's control factor model.

I will argue below that the world of Anglophone book reviews consciously sets out to review Arab female books in an Orientalist and/or feminist light. I will argue that this emphasis indicates to what extent Arab women writers are received into the Anglophone host literary system on the basis of whether or not they are perceived to be of value, either to readers wishing to expand their feminist knowledge or as an effective literary

tool to help maintain the Orientalist discourse through use of "Arab insiders" rather than through "Western voyeurism".[41]

As the quantity and quality of the first set of reviews for "first time writers" is important in encouraging a publisher to commission a second text from the same author, such "Orientalist/feminist" reviews will send a message to the publisher and the author that the author should write further books amenable to future Orientalist and/or feminist reviews and marketing.[42]

The process of selection by reviewers, publishers or scholars of writers who have already been canonised, is more subtle and complex, and I shall address an example of this subtlety in chapter V when discussing Jayyusi's selection of Khalifa's work for inclusion in her *Anthology of Palestinian Literature.*

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[41] A specific example of such practice, to which I will draw attention below in chapter III, is the way in which the feminist aspect of el-Saadawi's character and her writing is stressed far more than her leftist political views.

[42] New Reception Studies scholars add to this analysis by looking at how reviewers' reactions influence writers in the way that they write. They hold that by analysing reviews they might understand "how and why the style, ideas, aims, or forms of a writer evolved" (Goldstein, 2001). In *The Beauty of Inflection* (1988), Jerome McGann speaks of the influence of readers, reviewers and critics on the development of an author's oeuvre: "critical history ... [for the text/author] dates from the first responses and reviews [a work receives]. These reactions... modify the author's purposes and intentions, sometimes drastically, and they remain part of the recessive life [of the work] as it passes on to future readers". McGann goes further, saying that a work has "two interlocking histories...one that derives from the author's expressed decisions and purposes, and the other that derives from the critical reaction of the various readers." Similarly, Suasanne Janssen from Tilburg University in the Netherland, argues in "Reviewing as Social Practice" (1994) that "in the case of non-debutant authors, it is critical attention for previous work and the type of publishing firm which...account in critical attention." Kees Van Rees, "Modelling the Literary Fields: From System-Theoretical Speculation to Empirical Testing", *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 24.1 (March 1997): 94.

(iii) Academics

Lefevere identifies academics as another key category of rewriters. I will be drawing upon the role played by academic acknowledgment of translated literary works in later chapters.

When academic literary circles in one way or another acknowledge the merit of a translated text, it is clear that that text has reached a milestone, both in the short and longer term. By granting recognition, academics sustain the life-span of a work, both in academic terms (by for example including it on reading lists or by recommending its argument as the basis for an MSc or PhD) as well as in financial terms, given the strong relationship between academics and publishers. Once a text appears on a college or university reading list, the author gains both recognition and credibility through belonging to a canonised genre. Sutherland notes that for a novel to be placed on an academic reading list establishes it to, "stay in view for longer than the moment granted to most novels".[43] To the same effect, Lefevere writes that "to put it in a nutshell: the classics taught will be the classics which remain in print, and the classics which remain in print will be the classics known to the majority of people".[44] Once included on such a reading list, a translated work is effectively guaranteed a continuous presence, which in

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[43] John A. Sutherland, *Bestseller. Popular Fiction of the 1970's* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 11.
[44] Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame,* 20

turn often leads to continuous interest by academic and non-academic publishers.[45] Those books are usually kept on the reading list for at least several years.

The interaction between the two categories of expertise, reviewers and academics, is also very important when looking at the process by which a text ends up on an academic reading list. In a letter sent by the editor and manager of *Feminist Studies* (Claire G. Moses) to the publisher of Zed Books in relation to el-Saadawi's book, Moses states:

> Our readers are the target audience for books in women's studies. A significant number of our subscribers are professors who assign *Feminist Studies* to students; many other "subscribers" are university libraries; our audience is thus expanded to well beyond that of our actual subscribers.[46]

In addition, book readings and conferences organised by academic institutions to discuss a particular genre, author or set of authors can be key in providing for substantial exposure of a translated author.[47] Indeed, this is an example of interaction between reviewers and academics.

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[45] According to Julian Hoze at Zed Books, at the beginning of each academic year there is a clear increase in the sale of el-Saadawi's *Women at Point Zero* due to its inclusion on academic reading lists. (Julian Hoze, interview by author, 2 February 2005, London) The novel has reached its 13th edition and has sold 83,214 copies worldwide. More copies have been sold in the US than in Britain, with the difference being mainly due to its inclusion on academic reading lists in the US. *The Hidden Face of Eve*, second in popularity US after *Women at Point Zero*, has reached its 12th edition with 23,541 copies sold worldwide. Both books have been in print since their first publication.

[46] Correspondence with Zed Books, Claire G. Moses, Editor and Manager of Feminist Studies, March 9, 1990.

[47] It is worth noting that academic conferences make the effort to cooperate with cultural organizations when introducing the literary works of world literature to the public. For example, the African Studies Programme at New York University collaborated with the New York based Organization of Women Writers of Africa to promote translated African literature. Jane Cortez, a co-founder and president of the Organization noted that "the point of the conference is to expose the public to writers other than those they know and to promote the works of African writers." Lena William, "Women with Roots in Africa," *The New York Times*, 16 October 1997, 2. As an Egyptian author, el-Saadawi was present and according to a publicist from St. Martin's Press, Meredith Howard, she "captivated the audience." (Correspondence with Zed books, October 29, 1997) Howard also noted that following the conference, el-Saadawi attended a

Giles Clark has highlighted another important form of interaction within a literary system, namely that between publishers (an institution of patronage) and academics (a category of expertise). Any publisher hoping to develop readers' tastes relies on academic literary trends as one aspect of their market research, research which is designed to help them understand and successfully penetrate the literary market. Clark has argued that in undertaking market research, publishers look at the content of academic courses and the authors they feature, as well as the number of students enrolled on those courses. The purpose of doing so is to pick up new ideas and potential authors who may be chosen for grooming by editors. For Clark, appearing on an academic reading list means that publishers are guaranteed a paperback market amongst students and academics, but also amongst "a wider audience of concerned intellectuals and social movement activists".[48]

By way of final comment on the role played by academics, Amal Amireh and Lisa Suahir Majaji argue that British and American feminist academics' interest in translations of Arab women's novels is the main factor in explaining the success of those texts in Anglophone literary systems.[49] I will develop this point further in chapters III and IV when discussing el-Saadawi and al-Shaykh. It will become apparent in my

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number of radio interviews and was reviewed by the *New York Times* which noted *The Hidden Face of Eve* in particular.

[48] Giles Clark, *Inside Book Publishing* (London: Blueprint an Imprint of Chapman & Hall, 1994), 118.

[49] Amireh and Majaj, 1.

discussion of the reception of el-Saadawi for example, that feminist academics played a major role in maintaining an audience for her work in the 1990s.

2.4.3 Cultural superiority

In addition to Lefevere's framework of analysis for his control factor, I wish to draw upon one further aspect of his analysis. Lefevere draws attention to the existence of "power relations" between different cultures (for example between the Arab world and the Anglophone world) and the effect those relations have on aspects of the process involved in the reception of a literary work, on written and oral discourse within Western literary systems and on poetics within those systems.[50] Lefevere argues that an overall supremacist attitude of one culture in relation to another can be taken to be a strong reason in explaining a lack of interest in translating works. He argues that behind the poor introduction of Islamic literature into the Western literary system and English literary market in particular is "the relatively low prestige of Islamic culture in Europe and the Americas".[51] He adds that this feeling of superiority over other cultures is not confined to a neglect of literature. It is even more apparent when looking at the "liberties" that E. Fitzgerald will take with works from cultures which he considers to be inferior: "it is an amusement for me to take what liberties I like with these Persians who (as I think) are not Poets enough to frighten one from such excursions, and who really do

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[50] Although not a post-colonialist scholar, in so doing he mirrors post-colonial theory's approach to Translation Studies which I deal with below in section 2. 6.
[51] Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, 76.

want a little Art to shape them."[52] Lefevere adds that Fitzgerald would not have taken the same liberties had he been dealing with a text from Greek literature.

This cultural superiority has long been evident, not only with some translators who feel the liberty to deal with the original text however they please (noted above), but also by the fact that translations where the translator has clearly adapted the text to the poetics of the English literary system have a greater chance of gaining access to the English literary systems than translators who do not. An example can be found in some of the translations of the work of Rabindaranath Tagore, the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. In her critique of Tagore's English translations of his own poems, in which he changed not only the style but also the imagery and the tone of the work, Bassnet argues that "he makes adjustments to suit the ideology of the dominating culture or system, and therefore his translations fit the target-language poetics quite easily."[53] Although I agree with Bassnet's argument that the changes Tagore's has opted to make have surely contributed to his successful translations in the West, one needs to be aware that we do not focus solely on the works themselves and neglect the parties involved in the selection of a work. With reference to the reasons (or 'clues') behind the decision of who the Nobel Prise is to be awarded to in general, Anders Barny argues that the ideology and perspectives of the selecting committee and its chairman, be it conservative or liberal, actually determines the decision-making process.[54] In Tagore's case, Barny

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[52] Ibid., xvi.
[53] Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere, eds., *Translation, History and Culture* (London: Routledge, 1990 58.
[54] Professor Anders Barny, "From Alfred Nobel to Harold Pinter- A Short History of the Noble Prize in Literature," lecture at British library, 1 March 06, London.

notes that awarding him the prize represents a shift from the early conservative nature of the committee and its chairman. What is of interest in his analysis of the working of the committee and the power of its chairman is the relation between politics, ideology and the selection of what is considered the highest acknowledgment of a literary figure. This undoubtedly can be taken to represent the impact of these elements on the acknowledgment of translated literary figures in general.

2.4.4 Summary of Manipulation Theory

Manipulation Theory's contribution to translation studies reveals that the failure or success of literary works in gaining access to a foreign culture is not only or necessarily related to the literary merits of those works. Instead, it is governed by the extent to which all the parties involved in enabling the publication of a translated text – the writer, translator, publisher, academic critic and reviewer – adapt their working processes to the rules of poetics at play within a literary system and to the norms external to the literary system, such as ideology and politics. As noted by Vanderauwera, access is not dependent, on "the inherent qualitative inferiority or superiority of a given work, but hinges on a series of interrelated factors ranging from poetics to economics, from prestige to profit".[55]

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[55] Vanderauwera, 209.

In Sections 2.6 and 2.7 (Orientalism) and section 2.8 (feminism), I will turn to the specific examples of how Orientalism and Feminism can be taken as specific examples of discourse and ideology in the sense used by the Manipulation Theorists in order to explain the process of why and how much of Arab female writing is received into the Western literary system. However, to complete the analytical picture, I will first turn to the way in which a literary theory, "Reception Theory", approaches the role of the reader, and the way in which the reader in turn draws upon discourse and ideology such as feminism and Orientalism.

2.5 Reception Theory

2.5.1 Jauss' Horizon of Expectation Theory and Seger's "socio-cultural horizon"

In order to understand why a piece of writing is appealing to any readership, it is necessary to have a theoretical understanding of what makes a literary work interesting to an individual reader.

Readers of literary works do not receive new texts in an information vacuum. Rather, they read using a set of assumptions and conventions gained from previous reading experiences. These assumptions relate to a number of conceptual categories: the style, the genre, the general cultural background and the role of literature. At the end of this section I will give a specific example of one of these categories of assumption, namely

the reader's political context. I will argue that in the case of Arab female writers, political events in the Arab world and the way in which those events are portrayed by those in authority in the West, helped to create an appeal for Arab female writing in the minds of Western readers.

A useful term that may define the phenomenon of readers' shared assumptions is Robert's Jauss' term 'horizon of expectation'. Explaining the term, Jauss writes that "the new text evokes for the reader the horizon of expectations and rules familiar from earlier texts which are then varied, connected, altered or even just reproduced".[56] For Jauss a work is either rejected or accepted by a reader depending on whether it meets that reader's 'horizon of expectation'.

The notion of 'horizon of expectation' is highly significant as far as reviewers are concerned. Jauss argues that the reviewer, who is above all a "reader" before becoming an "evaluator of literature", will review a book with a belief about what the readerships' horizon of expectation will accept or not accept. He states that when a reviewer completes this process he or she has "actualised" or "concretised" the text.[57] Zeller makes the same point, adopting Jauss' term: "the concretization of a work is the public and accepted view of an author or a work, presumably reflecting the interaction of the work with an existing Erwartungshorizont 'horizon of expectation'."[58]

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[56] Hans Robert, Jauss. *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (Introduction by Paul de Man, tr: T.Bahti (Brighton: The Harvester Press, (1982), 23.
[57] Ibid., 135.
[58] Nancy Anne McClure, Zeller. "A Computer-Assisted Case Study of the Reception of an Exile", Bern – Frankfurt am Main – New York: Peterlang, 1983: 16.

According to Kees van Rees, for scholars to understand the dynamics of literary production, distribution and promotion, they need to "refrain from interpreting literary texts and expressing value judgments on them".[59] Instead, he maintains they need to interpret statements made about the work. In other words, they need to listen to those who actualise the work, the reviewers, in order to understand the dynamics of literary production.

In the discourse of reviews we find a tendency to render a new novel familiar to the reader of the review, for example by comparing the novel to a well-known genre or a previously successful work. The intention is clearly to appeal to readers' expectations. Reviewers of translated works tend to relate the style of the translated author to a local author. A good example would be the phrase 'the closest British equivalent to this…'.[60]

Jauss adds that at times a piece of writing challenges or goes beyond the readerships' horizon of expectation in some way and is nonetheless successfully reviewed. He calls this "novelty". His explanation for this phenomenon is that such works are of great artistic quality, which is to say despite their novelty that would normally render them unattractive to a reader, it is their artistic merit that makes them attractive.

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[59] Kees Van Rees, "Modelling the Literary Fields: From System-Theoretical Speculation to Empirical Testing," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 24.1 (March 1997): 92.
[60] "Nawal el-Saadawi," Literature Resource Centre. http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/LitRC?c=2&ste=36&docNum=H1000029177&KA=Saad1/6/03.

Translated literature in general usually earns a place in the receiving literary culture because it introduces into that culture something different or new, for example stylistically or anthropologically or politically.[61]

I would argue that in line with this analysis, the successful reception of translated works of Arab women writers in Western literary circles could be viewed as part of a broad cultural curiosity amongst Anglophone readers for Arabic literature. This is because such texts undoubtedly reveal that the Arab social world reflects its conflicts between traditionalists and modernists, speaks of its changing conditions and addresses the existential dilemmas of men and women.

While this explanation goes some way towards explaining Western readers' interest in some works by Arab female writers, a broader analysis is also possible. Whilst Jauss' model recognises that a reader may have an interest in the translated text for its informative (anthropological) novelty, Segers adds to this analysis a set of broader considerations which take into account the wider cultural context in which a text exists, that is to say, the ideology, assumptions and individual experience of the reader. He defines this as the "socio-cultural horizon of expectation"[62] and is thereby drawing upon Lefevere's categories of patronage as set out above.

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[61] For example, Preston argues that the American author James Fenimore Cooper's popularity amongst Germans relates to the fact that "people in Germany were fascinated by the splendid portrayal of life among the aborigines." Barbra Preston A, Cooper in Germany, (Bloomington: Indiana University Studies, 1914), 54.

[62] Jacques Kaat, "Reception-Sociological Study of the Reception of Dutch Twentieth Century Fictional Prose in Translation in Great Britain (1970-1983) in Relation to the Dutch and English Literary Canon" (Ph.D. diss., The University of Hull, 1987), 30-31.

According to Gadamer, the horizon of expectation may also be defined "with reference to the prejudices that we bring with us at any given time, since these represent a "horizon" over which we cannot see." The act of understanding is then described in one of Gadamer's most famous metaphors as "a fusion of one's own horizon with the historical horizon."[63]

As pointed out above, it should be apparent that there is a significant conceptual overlap between Lefevere's system of poetics, which takes into account a culture's broad ideologies and discourses, and the broader notion of a socio-cultural horizon of expectation which is created and reinforced by the same forces. Thus, when looking at a reader's horizon of expectation, we can take into account both Jauss' novelty factor, as well as the way that the presence of one or more dominant discourses or ideologies, as reflected in the way in which a text is translated, reviewed and criticised, influences the reader. Put another way, categories of expertise (reviewers, academics and translators) recognise that a translated text requires that the reader have some "understanding" of the culture that has produced the text before embracing that text. Otherwise, the translated text would be too foreign to the reader.[64] As a result, the reviewers engaged in poetics render the text more "understandable" by relating a text to what they believe to be reader's ideological framework.

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[63] Robert Holub, *Reception Theory: A critical introduction* (London and New York: Methuen, 1983), 42.

[64] In her analysis of the German response to Latin American literature Yolanda Broyles's work (1981), refers to Floyed Henry Allport's 1924 definition of a reader's attitude to a text as involving a "preparation of response" or "preparation in advance for the actual response". This notion is of particular importance when looking at responses to a translated text. For Broyles, if a reader approaches a text with an ideological framework, that framework not only serves to help the reader to embrace the overall message but also enables him or her to overcome the stylistic, cross-cultural and linguistic barriers that arise, such as connotative and denotative meanings of words, names, symbols, genre, style and culture.

As I will argue below, in the context of the reception of Arab female writing the dominant discourse in Anglophone countries is Orientalism and it is principally, though not exclusively, this discourse that is drawn upon by the categories of expertise to react to and reinforce the readerships' horizon of expectation.

2.5.2 Politics and the Western horizon of expectation

When looking at the reception of individual authors' works below, part of my analysis will look at the political current events influencing that reception process. The notion of a reader's horizon of expectation enables us to address the interaction between literature and politics in relation both to the appeal of the translations of Arab woman writers' books and even at times the very publication of the work, irrespective of whether it is believed prior to publication that the work will be a success. In this sense, political events can also play an important, and even key, role in shaping the horizon of expectation of the reader and, depending on the context and timing, in arousing interest in a foreign culture for the first time.

I would argue that there are two main considerations to take into account concerning how political events trigger a readerships' interest. One involves active encouragement by the forces of patronage and categories of expertise for the reader to take interest, while the other simply involves a readership being naturally drawn to literature that will quench a natural desire for more information about a political event. Of course there is a

very thin, and often broken, line between manipulation of the audience and natural curiosity. There is no intention here of reifying these two 'logics', but however tangled, it remains useful to point an analytical distinction were audience response must not be reduced to elite "manipulation".

Firstly, concerning a readership receiving "encouragement", the influence of political events on interest in literature is not a new phenomenon and therefore not exclusive to the process by which Arabic literature has been introduced to the West. According to France,[65] as far back as the Napoleonic era interest in Arabic literature has always been shaped by two dimensions: economic and political interest on the one hand and the scholarly editing of manuscripts on the other.[66] As mentioned above, Lefevere's analysis of the relationship between those in power and literary discourses concludes that at times literary texts serve to reinforce the dominant ideology held by those in power.[67] In the West, scholarly interest in the Orient was never separated from political discourse and, as I will argue below, that discourse was and at times remains the discourse of Orientalism.

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[65] France, 138.

[66] Said (1987) refers in his work to Napoleon's use of Orientalism to portray his military campaign in Egypt as a civilising force. This has parallels today in the focus on the negative aspects of Islam and the impact of veiling on Arab women's lives as part of the cultural propaganda in the 'war on terror'. In this way, in present times literature can be used to serve the political interests of those hostile to Islam.

[67] The involvement of governmental bodies in encouraging the circulation of a particular literary figure for political purposes is an established method. In an article discussing the works of George Orwell, Timothy Gorton Ash asserts that the British office responsible for anti-communist propaganda has supported the translation of Orwell's *Animal Farm* into Arabic, and several languages with a view to influencing countries which were in danger of falling to Communism. Timothy Gorton Ash. *New York Times Review* (August 17 2003): 8.

Secondly, concerning a readership taking interest of its own accord in literature that deals with contemporary political events, irrespective of what those in power or categories of expertise may require of specific texts, it may be argued that some key political events provoke the interest of the readership in particular parts of the world without any particular active involvement or manipulation by categories of expertise.[68] Bharatic Mukherjee argues that some works that are written about such key events can "feed the curiosity people have about "real life" behind the immediate headlines behind the daily news".[69] He notes that this is a major reason why some "exotic" novels are occasionally made available in English.

I would argue that the reaction in the West to the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the way in which this may have assisted el-Saadawi to penetrate the Western literary system, constitutes an example of both of the above processes coming together to create a new literary market for an Arab writer. I should immediately make clear that I do not think that this event was a key factor in her success, but that it is worth considering the impact it may have had on the interest of her early readership.

Although no detailed research has been carried out on this issue, Amireh refers to the Iranian Revolution and the subsequent revival of Western hostility towards Islam in the 1970's as one of the major factors in el-Saadawi's success in penetrating Western

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[68] It is noted that following the events of 11 September, copies of the Qur'an in English translation disappeared fast from the shelves of bookshops.
[69]Bharati. Mukherjee, "Betrayed by Blind Faith," review of *God Dies by the Nile* by Nawal el Saadwi, *New York Times- Sunday Book Review* 27 (July 1986): 14.

literary markets. This is important as Amireh relates the *initial* interest in el-Saadawi both to political events and to the interrelation between the political, cultural and literary arenas. She argues that the Iranian Revolution rekindled Western hostility to Islam and gave rise once again to the image of the oppressed Arab woman as a symbol of the rise of Islam.[70] Ahmad agrees in relation to a more contemporary context when he states that the Iranian Revolution, together with the climate of preoccupation in the early 1990s with an "Islamic threat", shifted the material conditions and the ideological climate for "the Western narrative of women in Islam".[71] Similarly, the first Gulf War in 1991 created interest in Anglophone reader's curiosity of the Middle East, although perhaps more in the US than in the UK.

An example of the first consideration (i.e. "encouragement of a readership" to take an interest in a political event through using literature) being at play is the way in which a major US publishing house reacted to the 1993 Oslo Agreement. Hassan, an assistant professor at the Department of English at Michigan State University, argues that the American patronage of the Oslo Agreement is a major factor in explaining why *The Anthology of Palestinian Literature* of 1992 was published by the prestigious Columbia University Press.[72] Publication came at a time when the US administration decided to acknowledge the existence of a Palestinian people with a right to aspire to statehood. He argues that presenting the Palestinians as possible partners of peace for the Israelis

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[70] Early examples of el-Saadawi's English-translated writing include the topic of female circumcision.
[71] Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale UP, 1994), 149.
[72] Hassan Salah D, "Nation Validation: Modern Palestinian Literature," *Social Text* 21 (2003): 9, 7-23. (Duke University Press) http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/social_text/v021/21.2hassan.html

required a reconstruction of the image of Palestinians, long portrayed as terrorists or simply as a ghost population, and that nothing would serve this purpose better than a literary representation of a Palestinian nation which by its very existence on paper would implicitly acknowledge the existence of a modern political Palestinian culture.

Similarly, in his article "Nation Validation" (2003), Hassan writes:

> The Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature entered the environment of US culture and publishing unavoidably as part of a broader agenda that sought to rehabilitate and domesticate the Palestinian cause, to make it fit within the framework of the US sponsored peace process.[73]

In my view, Hassan's general analysis correctly gives significance to the selective way in which those who choose works for translation encourage the translation or circulation of a given work of literature in a way that corresponds with the political agenda of the host culture. Although the work was published a year before the Oslo Agreement, it may be argued that the literary scene has been set up.

Having now completed my analysis of the theoretical framework that identifies the key actors and concepts involved in the reception of a foreign literary text, I will now turn in more theoretical detail to the discourses of Orientalism and Feminism as particular examples of Lefevere's conceptual form of ideology, which affect all of those actors (patron, expertise and reader) alike when receiving the books by Arab female writers in the Western literary system.

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[73] Ibid., 2.

2.6 Post-Colonial Theory and Translation Studies

Before turning to the specifics of Orientalism, through which I can refer specifically to the power relationship between the Western World and the Arab World, this section will briefly set out how post-colonial theorists look at the process of translation through the prism of First-Third World power relations.

The interest in the phenomenon of translation for the anthropologists and historians of Post-Colonial Studies arises partly from their concern about unveiling the colonisers' "subtle uses of power through controls on communication". [74] This analysis of communication leads post-colonialists to the conclusion that the process of translation was used as a form of violence and that translation generally played an important role in facilitating colonisation. In Rafael's terms "...for the Spaniards, translation was always a matter of reducing the native language and culture to accessible objects for... imperial intervention".[75]

In this section I will set out the post-colonial (and particularly Jaquemond's) analysis, firstly in order to outline the conclusions of post-colonial theory's regarding the forces governing how many texts are translated from the Third World into the First World (and,

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[74] Douglas Robinson, *Translation and Empire* (Manchester: St Jerome Pub, 1997), 4.
[75] Vicente L. Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion in tagalong Society Under Early Spanish Rule* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1988), 213.

if at all, *vica versa*), and secondly to set out post colonial theory's analysis of the image that is portrayed and maintained by the coloniser of the colonised through the means of translation.

According to post-colonial theorists, whether or not a text is translated and thereby transferred from the Third World to the First World is determined by the relationship between the colonial and colonised cultures, that is to say between two different literary or cultural systems which are not of equal status. It is a relationship established across power differentials and it is described using the concepts of "First World" and "Third World" which are terms embodying different degrees of political influence.

Venuti argues that the hegemony of Anglo-American culture affects the entire process of how a text is transferred from the weaker culture into the hegemonic culture, including the selection of the text (the content of which must comply with the expectation of the reader's culture), the manner of translation and the mode of reception of the text:

> British and American publishing has reaped the financial benefits of successfully imposing Anglo-American cultural values on a vast foreign readership, while producing cultures in the United Kingdom and the United States that are aggressively monolingual, unreceptive to the foreign, accustomed to fluent translations that invisibly inscribe foreign texts with English-language value and provide readers with the narcissistic experience of recognising their own culture in a cultural other.[76]

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[76] Lawrance Venuti, ed. *Rethinking Translation: Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology* (New York & London: Routledge), 1992:6.

Richard Jacquemond describes a wide-ranging diagram of transitional inequalities resulting from the vast power differentials between the First and Third Worlds. This diagram has produced two main insights into the contrasting attitude that these two Worlds have towards translation.[77]

The first of these insights is what Jacquemond calls "disproportionate translations", a phrase that seeks to reflect the fact that a vastly greater number of works are translated from English, the language of the world's hegemonic culture, into Third World languages.[78] Venuti notes that the imbalances of cultural power leads to a generally low percentage of works being translated into English, regardless of whether the book is from the Third World or not. Venuti's statistics show that the percentage of books translated from European languages into English is fairly low. In addition it is also interesting to compare the fact that 22,724 books were translated from English into other languages world-wide in 1984 with the fact that only 839 Spanish books, 163 Chinese books and 536 Arabic books were translated into English.[79]

Jacquemond's second insight is that he relates the West's lack of interest in oriental cultures to the "fixed image" they have of oriental literary works. These works are

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[77] Richard Jacquemond, 'Translation and Cultural Hegemony: The Case of French-Arabic Translation', in Lawrence Venuti, ed. *Rethinking Translation: Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology* (New York & London: Routledge), 1992: 139-58.

[78] In contrast, Jacquemond argues that works of literature from dominant cultures are chosen by the weaker culture for translation, simply "because they come from the hegemonic cultures" Jacquemond, 'Translation and Cultural Hegemony: The Case of French-Arabic Translation', 32. The generality of such an assertion can be questioned. By giving such a general judgement, Jacquemond disregards ideological, economic and, more importantly, political factors that, as we have seen from the work of Lefevere, strongly influence the reception of translations, even in dominated cultures.

[79] Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility* (New York & London: Routledge), 1995:14

typically seen as constituting a difficult and mysterious style and content.[80] Certainly, it is an image that affects the acceptability of such texts in a culture which, according to Venuti, is "unreceptive to the foreign and accustomed to fluent translations".[81]

For present purposes and without wishing to anticipate the following section dealing with Orientalism in more detail, the "fixed image" that I will draw upon in later chapters is the notion of "Orientalism". Arabic literature has a long history of generally being of interest only to members of academic circles. Because in the past it was mainly members of highly specialised educational levels that read translated works, Arabic texts that were translated tended to be difficult and highly literal. Thus it was natural that at first they were only read and digested by Orientalist academics and other commentators. Thus, for these books to be made accessible to a more general readership, the aforementioned Orientalist academics had to provide an Introduction to any given translated text to render it more accessible to the general reader. As these academics were Orientalists, such Introductions, with their use of Orientalised concepts such as the image of the veil and an emphasis on sensuality, became key in shaping a generalised Orientalist horizon of expectation amongst the more general Western readership.

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[80] Marilyn Booth (visiting Professor of Comparative Literature at Brown University) participated in the Supreme Council for Culture Conference of Women's Writing 2002 and spoke to Youssef Rakha about literature in "an unsympathetic world". She refers to the Western refusal to publish two translated Arab novels she believes have high artistic merit stating that they were rejected, not on the basis of being badly translated or because of a boring context, but because "readers in the West don't expect to have to work hard when they read an Arabic novel. That also has its impact on the translated text itself, the politics of translation as seen within the text. There's often a desire to have a text that is somehow made easier for readers in the West, in which things are explained." Youssef Rakha, "an unsympathetic world," *Al-Ahram,* no.611 (7-13 November 2002).

[81] Robinon, 33.

Thus historically the reception of such literary works was almost always limited to a small group of specialists or students of foreign cultures. In addition, the general readership's understanding of and encounter with the Orient heavily depended on the Orientalist representations of a small group of specialists, in whom an unquestioning trust was placed for their role as a "grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness".[82]

This interaction between a dominating ideology and the academic world is a powerful example of the Manipulation Theorists' notion of categories of "expertise", which as we have seen, includes academics interacting with one of Lefevere's forms of patronage as outlined below:

> Professionals who represent the "reigning orthodoxy" at any given time in the development of a literary system are close to the ideology of patrons dominating that phase in the history of the social system in which the literary system is embodied.[83]

2.7 Orientalism

In this section I will summarise the main thrust of the theory of Orientalism, will look at the claim that Orientalism has set up a benchmark against which all Arab texts seeking

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[82] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1978), 6.
[83] Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame*, 15.

to enter the Western literary system are measured and finally I will then turn to some specific examples of where academic commentators have reflected upon the role Orientalism has played in the reception of Arab women's texts in the Western literary system.

On the basis of the above sections, the overall purpose of doing so is to argue in the following chapters that Orientalism's discourse is drawn upon by categories of "expertise"/rewriters (within the Manipulation Theory model), that it has shaped both the overall Western cultural discourse about the Orient and that it thereby plays a significant role in reinforcing Western reader's' horizon of expectation in relation to their reception of Arab texts.

2.7.1 The essence of Orientalism

Foucault argues that knowledge inherently contains the power of constructing social consciousness. All forms of authority therefore use knowledge to build a schematic basis in order to evaluate and differentiate between issues and phenomena. In other words, they use knowledge to build the foundation of social thinking. Clearly this power can threaten the stability of any given set of foundations. Any culture therefore imposes internal constraints upon its writers and thinkers to maintain the desired form of

foundations.[84] This degrading of knowledge to the service of the authority in turn ensures the persistence and durability of a hegemonic system.[85]

In light of this analysis, Said defines Orientalism as "an enormous system or inter-textual network of rules and procedures which regulate anything that may be thought, written or imagined about the Orient." This system was seen to dominate, restructure and have authority over the Orient.[86] Said argues that this system has been formed over a lengthy period of time by travellers, translators and intellectuals who have had contact with the Orient, who have read its literature and who have written about their impressions. He argues that their writing has created not only knowledge but also "the very reality they appear to describe":

> There is a rather complex dialectic of reinforcement by which the experiences of readers in reality are determined by what they have read, and this in turn influences writers to take up subjects defined in advance by readers' experiences.[87]

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[84] The way in which a culture "imposes" itself in this way can also be self-executing in the same way that the media can engage in self-censorship. In *Europe's Myths of the Orient,* Kabbani argues that the topics relating to the East have never been free of prejudiced and heavily subjective interpretation by intellectuals. Reviewing the work of Western intellectuals who have written about the East from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, she asserts that even those who had a scientific background could not resist the temptation not to observe and emphasise aspects that they expected to see. In relation to the works of Galland, she asserts that "like many Europeans before him, he concentrated his attention on the manifestations of violence, often linked with sexuality, that were supposedly intrinsic to the East. Rana, Kabbani, *Europe's Myths of the Orient: Devise and Rule* (London: Macmillan, 1993), 25.

[85] Said, 328.

[86] Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 1998), 76. For Gandhi it is "an enormous system or inter-textual network of rules and procedures which regulate anything that may be thought, written or imagined about the Orient" Gandhi, 76.

[87] Said., 94.

Thus he considers that the knowledge gained from books by imperial powers (or in the terminology of the Manipulation Theorists "political patronage") has enabled those travellers, translators and intellectuals to encounter and deal with the Orient.[88]

Topics that the original Orientalist created and wrote about – for example, the mysterious, the sexual and distant other – have attracted the attention of readers, have been recreated in later Orientalists' writing and have led the categories of expertise to adapt their behaviour in a way to reproduce those topics. In Said's terms, such writings produce "a tradition or what Michael Foucault calls a discourse, whose material presence or weight, not the originality of a given author, is really responsible for the texts produced out of it".[89]

For Said, any apparent differences that exist between different writers' views of the Orient are not to be explained by stating that those authors interpret the reality of the Orient in distinct ways. Rather, these differences are mainly in form or personal style of presentation, "every one of them kept intact the separateness of the Orient, its eccentricity, its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability, its supine malleability".[90]

Finally, relating the role of translation to the hegemonic role of Orientalism, Niranjana relates the West's interest in the Oriental theme in literary works to the imperialist

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[88] Said, 94.
[89] Said, 94.
[90] Said, 206.

obsession with the dark, exotic and unacceptable behaviour of non-Europeans: "translation reinforces hegemonic versions of the colonised, helping them acquire what Edward Said calls representations or objects without history.[91]

2.7.2 Orientalism establishing a benchmark for Arab texts

Bearing in mind the points raised in the previous section in relation to post-colonial theory's approach to translation studies, the Western stereotyped image of the Orient, as set out in Said's theory of Orientalism, has led post colonial Theory to conclude that translation is an activity which inevitably plays a significant role in establishing cultural identities and leads to new modes of cultural creation.

In other words, and by way of immediate concrete example in the present context, the theory maintains that a set of translated novels written by Arab women on topics relating to Arab women's social issues are likely to be viewed in the West as a definitive reflection of the cultural and social reality of Arab women's lives. The "anthropological" value attached to their content, which overrides the artistic value of the content, constructs a reality of these cultures in the minds of the Western reader.

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[91] Tejaswini Niranjana, *History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context* (University of California Press), 1992:3. Kabbani, giving an example of the works of Galland, asserts that "like many Europeans before him, he concentrated his attention on the manifestations of violence, often linked with sexuality, that were supposedly intrinsic to the East Kabbani, 25.

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Furthermore, this process establishes in Western consciousness a conceptual norm of what is and is not Oriental. Consequently Orientalism is argued to establish a benchmark that literary texts from the dominated (Oriental) culture need to respect and adapt to if they wish to gain access to Western literary systems. Jacquemond makes this point in relation to all First-Third World literary interactions when he states that the hegemonic culture tends to "select for translation works from that culture that fit prevailing stereotypes of it".[92] This process amounts to the reception and the subsequent status of a text being conditional upon the text conforming to a set of Western stereotypes, and Jacquemond argues that a process of compliance with these demands has emerged within the literary sphere of the dominated cultures. He argues that non-English-speaking writers may write purely for the purpose of being translated into English, the language of "power, culture and knowledge". Writers know that publication in English holds the key to being recognised both internationally as well as in his or her society. Such writers are accused of having a "willingness to assimilate their writing to English or French expectations, conventions, norms and genres". Consequently, the translation of their works becomes part of the Orientalists' enduring creation of the stereotyped image of the Orient and, due to the power of the written word, "provides a new and major criterion for the imposition and maintenance of colonialism".[93] It is within this context that one may understand the concern of Arab intellectuals about the sensitivity

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[92] Jacquemond, 'Translation and Cultural Hegemony: The Case of French-Arabic Translation', 153. . According to Lefevere, translation of texts into languages of hegemonic cultures thereby becomes an actualisation of the socially prevailing attitudes towards otherness. Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting and the Manipulation of Literary Fame,* 75.

[93] Jacquemond, 'Translation and Cultural Hegemony: The Case of French-Arabic Translation', 153.

of the content of novels by Arab writers,[94] as reflected in an example given in the next section and in chapter III's analysis of the reception of el-Sadaawi's work.

2.7.3 Academics' reflections Orientalism's role in the Western reception of Arab texts

Without wishing to anticipate my own comments (and those of commentators) on how Orientalism has affected the Western reception of the writings of my chosen three authors, I would like to point here to a number of academics and critics who have reflected on Orientalism's role in the Western reception of Arab texts, including on the role it has played amongst feminists.

Many feminist scholars note that not enough has been done to mitigate the 'otherness' of Arab women's literature. In her introduction to *Gender Writing / Writing Gender: The Representation of Women in a Selection of Modern Egyptian Literature*, Al-Ali, a German-Iraqi feminist, points out that an "awareness of bias in general and of ethnocentrism and Orientalism in particular is of crucial importance for any scholar in our discipline". She notes that Arab women are often portrayed in a static manner and

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[94] Taha Hussain, for example, expresses his worries about the novel *Harem*. It was written in French in 1937 by Kout AL-Kloub Aldmashkiaa and, as Hussain argues, depicts some very private aspects of the lives of Egyptians. Hussain expresses with great concern and sadness the fact that the novelist, who was born and brought up in Egypt, has dealt with very fundamental aspects of Egyptian personality, psychology and life in a novel that was originally addressed to the French and written in French. Hussain also questions the benefit of revealing the secrets and inner social aspects to those who have been known to have a negative perspective of the East (al-Adab, 1999:48) Jākmūn, Rīshār. "Min 'Asr al-Nahda ila Zaman al-'Awlama" *Al-Adāb* 5/6 May-June 1999.

are reduced to conforming to the stereotype of an obedient daughter, wife or mother within the framework of the Islamic patriarchal family. [95] A number of academics complain that even when US students have the opportunity to analyse work from the Arab world in general and works dealing with women's issues in particular, the text is often presented with no accompanying political or socio-cultural background. This results in the work being wrongly perceived by the students as alien and bearing little relevance to their own lives.[96]

With reference to the point made above concerning writers seeking to adapt to an Orientalist benchmark, two major critics who ultimately relate the success of Arab writers in Western literary systems to those writers' awareness of Orientalism and the need to adapt their work in order to secure English publication are G. Dallal and R. Kabbani.

Dalaal relates al-Shaykh's success in the Western media to al-Shaykh's conscious misrepresentation of the reality that she claims to describe in her fiction.[97] She argues that the way in which she presents the lives of Arab women in particular is a key element in gaining the interest of the Western media. She argues that writers such as al-Shaykh are well aware of this fact and are making the most of it in order to ensure that their works are published in the West.[98] Following her analysis, I would argue that

[95] Nadje Sadig Al-Ali, *Gender Writing/ Writing Gender: The Representation of Women in a Selection of Modern Egyptian Literature* (The American University in Cairo: Cairo Press, 1994), 6.
[96] Amireh and Majaj, 13.
[97] Janine B. Dallal. *al Adab*, "The Islamic World, the Perils of Occidentalism," issue 6/5 (1999): 53.
[98] ibid., 53.

when the Western media describe al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra* as an "impressive and eloquent novel [in which al-Shaykh] has lifted the corner of a dark curtain on the hidden and mysterious lives of women in Middle Eastern societies"[99], they are to my mind misrepresenting Arab society and life in the Gulf countries.

Although my analysis will recognise the importance of the role played by Orientalism in the reception of Arab women writers into the Western literary system, I wish to note here that there is a significant shortcoming in this analytical approach, which maintains that as summarised above, the essence of the reception process involves the submission of various actors within a literary system, including the writer herself, to the overall demands of a hegemonic system (in this case an Orientalist system). Although it may only be part of the story, this analysis ignores the numerous other reasons at play in the reception process which I will look at in the subsequent chapters in relation to each writer.

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[99] Jenine B. Dallal "The Islamic World, the Perils of Occidentalism," *The Times Literary Supplement* 24 (April 1998): 8-9. The title of the article only serves to reinforce Dalaal's point. I would agree with Dalaal that the symbolic choice in *The Sunday Telegraph's* commentary is an example of the contemporary influence of the Orientalists' discourse in which the obsession with a "hidden" and "concealed" Oriental life, (i.e., with the woman behind the veil and in the harem) being paramount topics. Concerning the use of images, an interesting example is to be found in the introduction to the autobiography of Queen Nour al-Hussain (*Leap of Faith: Memoirs of an Unexpected* life) in *The New York Times Review* (2004). The reviewer starts his review referring back to the old story of Western Female aristocrats being lured by the charm of an Arabian princess, before starting his review of a book that deals with the politics and culture of the Middle East. More generally, it is notable that there are a large number of books and articles that are related to Third World literature or politics that depict evocative images of the Middle East.

2.8 - Feminism and Translation

2.8.1 Purpose of section

In this section I will present the background to the role played by feminism as a conceptual form of Lefevere's ideological patronage in relation to the reception of Arab women writer's texts in the Western literary system.

I will begin by looking at Western feminism as an ideology and at its interest in Arab female writing (section 2.8.2). I will then set out how, by the 1980s, Western feminist writings had created a substantial literary market and that publishers noted a vacuum for female writing from the Third World within that market, (section 2.8.3). This will serve as a context in which to analyse how these writings were received into the Western literary system through a feminist patronage that was originally heavily influenced by Orientalism (section 2.8.4). I will end by setting out my initial views on the question of the extent to which Orientalism influences the reception of particular Arab female authors into the Western literary system (section 2.8.5).

2.8.2 Feminism as an ideology and its interest in Arab female writing

2.8.2.1 Feminist methodological principles

As a theory, feminism originally included the notion of universal sisterhood, which maintained that all women everywhere shared the same problems and, could therefore be analysed on a level playing field and in a similar manner regardless of context.[100] With time, this notion proved to be problematic for some feminists, particularly socialist feminists[101], and more importantly for postcolonial feminist scholars. I will turn to those scholars further below but it is important to first recognise the powerful role that the notion of universal sisterhood originally played in building a receptive environment for women's world literature in general and for Arab women writers in particular.[102]

In the late 1970s, western feminists championed the belief that "women's history could only be legitimately written from a feminist standpoint".[103] This "exclusivist cultural point of view",[104] which allows only those who experience live the issue to articulate it, granted women the chance to voice their living experience in a way that was viewed as quite distinct from the male interpretation of that experience. Referring to the process of validating feminist knowledge of women's oppression as a sound scientific knowledge, in the face of dominant male logic, Ramazanoglu, for example, writes that feminists

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[100] Ramazanoglu writes: "...feminist research is about women, by women, and for women [and] assumes common interests between women and overlooks the power differences between them." Caroline Ramazanoglu, *Feminims and the Contradictions of Oppression* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 54.

[101] See for example Ramzanoglu, *Feminism and the Contradictions of Oppression*, 96.

[102] Other female authors from other parts of the world were highly celebrated at the time such as Jung Chang, the author of *The Three Swan* (1991). According to Ien Ang, of Chinese-Australian descent, this interest was the result of Western feminists' assumption that voices of women from ethnic origins were "needed to contest and correct the old exclusions of the established feminist order and that they [would] win non-white women authorship and authority within a renewed, less exclusionary feminism". Ien Ang, 'I'm a Feminist but... "Other" Women and Postnational Feminism' from Transition: New Australian Feminisms by Barbara Caine and Rosemary Pringle (St Martin's Press, 1995)

[103] Ramazanoglu, 13.

[104] Arthur Marwick, *The Arts in the West since 1945* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

methodologies depend on passionate female researchers to "express their own experience which gives a view of society otherwise inaccessible to outsiders".[105]

This view finds resonance with el-Saadawi's argument:

> (In general the) portrayal of Arab women in past and contemporary Arab literature does not reflect a genuine image of her. It is Arab woman as seen through the eyes of Arab men, and therefore tends to be incomplete, distorted and devoid of a clear understanding and consciousness.[106]

Ramazanoglu argued that protagonists of this subjective knowledge need to be selective and capable of interpreting their "personal experiences in terms of sexual politics", with an awareness of concepts such as patriarchy and oppression.[107]

According to Julia Kristeva, "literature reveals the truth about an otherwise repressed, nocturnal, secret and unconscious universe and that women need the potency of the imaginary".[108] For Kristeva, literature and its scope for drawing upon the imagery is a means through which women can narrate their story, and which thereby allows them to voice their objections to society and their aspirations which society usually prevents them from expressing.

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[105] Ramazanoglu, 52.
[106] El-Saadawi, 166.
[107] Ramazanoglu, 52. In a study of women's novels in the United States between 1860 and 1990, Jane Tompkins argues that women's writings should be studied not because they manage to escape the limitations of their particular time and place, but because they offer powerful examples of the way in which a culture thinks about itself, and articulates and proposes solutions to the problems that shape a particular historical moment. (*Tompkins, 1985:xi., cited in al-Ali, 10)*
[108] Al-Ali, 10.

Rebecca O'Rourke regards the interest in women-centred writing as politically motivated. She argues that it has less to do with the marketability of female writers and more to do with the rise of feminism and the women's movement. She comments:

> The willingness of mainstream publishers to print and reprint the work of women must in part be their response to the creation, through the women's movement, of a feminist audience whose choice of reading is women centred novels. Much as we might regret who makes the profit on these works, we have to be grateful for this extension of available works for us to read.[109]

This belief in the fundamental importance of the lived experience was later challenged by those who argued that knowledge obtained merely through experience is nothing more than simply "a point of view with no specific significance to society".[110] Whether or not this challenge is valid, it is this exclusivist feminist cultural point of view which transcended all other conceptual and material barriers in order to confer value on the work of feminists from any class or culture. The sentiment that Western feminists' intellectual work was based on "a celebration of sisterhood with its implicit assumption that women qua women have a necessary basis for unity and solidarity" was reflected in women's studies and academic courses.[111]

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[109] Rebecca O'Rourke, "Summer Reading," *Feminist Review*, no.2, 1979.
[110] Amos, V. and Parmer. "Challenging Imperial Feminism," *Feminism and Race*, Bhavnani, Kum Kum. Ed. (Oxford University Press 2001), 19, 3-17.
[111] Ibid., 19.

2.8.2.2 Feminist interest in translation of Third World writing

This belief in the solidarity of women's fight against oppression resulted in Western feminists developing an interest in the writings of feminists from other parts of the world who used literature as a mean of voicing what would otherwise be socially unacceptable commentary.[112]This interest was accompanied in the 1980s by the considerable success in the Western literary market of women-centred writing in general. Both feminist publishing groups and commercial publishers first showed their interest in this form of writing in the 1980s, since which time this interest has continued.[113]

Following Simon's view of translation as an activity of cultural creation and exchange[114], the process of translating Third World texts into the dominant language of the First World was regarded by feminists as a powerful means of linking "networks in the service of progressive political agendas and in the creative renewal of literary tradition"[115], as well as being an essential cultural task and a means of the movement of ideas.

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[112] Anna Gouraly, a literary editor of Zed Press and a publisher specialised in publishing works of the Third World asserts "You can say a lot in fiction which you cannot in fact." Sajid Rizvi, *"Reflecting reality in fiction,"* review of *God Dies by the Nile,* by Nawal el-Saadawi. *Kuwait Times*, 25 January 1986.

[113] The Palestinian writer Liana Badr asserts in her interview with Liliane Lando in *Spare Rib* (1989) that the interest behind the reception of her first work in English, *A Compass for the Sunflower,* was largely a feminist one.

[114] Sherry Simon, *Gender in Translation: Cultural Identity and the Politics of Transmission* (London: Routledge, 1996), 136.

[115] Ibid.

It is through the existence of book clubs and feminist literary journals, and with more women reading than men, feminism in the West always had a good basis upon which to create a market for writings of women from the rest of the world. In feminism, novels have always played a major role in voicing women's experience. Consequently, English translations of Third World women's literature became a key part of incorporating the experience of women from the Third World into Western feminist knowledge and analysis. The practical implication of the above was the commissioning of English translations of Third World women writers. Once this had been achieved, the Western market in Arab female writings began to develop.

2.8.3 Western feminism developing a market for Arab female writing

El-Saadawi, as a woman writing about women, was one example of the perfect Third World candidate to enter Western feminist literary culture. Michele Roberts, who met el-Saadawi in London in the early 80s, stated:

> Hers was a project of social-realism: to speak of all those things that had never been said…Many British women read her books. We shared the ideology of novel writing. We believed in telling the truth and that novels could testify and affect social reality.[116]

The importance of Roberts' comment is that it explains the appeal of el-Saadawi's work to the British female readership through the notion of a social consciousness amongst those readers.

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[116] Raekha Prasad, "Lone star of the Nile," *The Guardian, 17* June 2000, 6.

It is worth noting that, according to Peter Clark (a translator and expert on Arabic literature), although modern Arabic literature in English translation has, generally had only "a small impact on the Anglophone reading public"[117] the English market for Arab women-centred writing is bigger.[118] Clark claims that in order to attract the interest of English publishers you need to translate the work of young, female Arab novelists, because the question of marketability is uppermost in the publishers' mind.[119] He recounts his attempts to publish the writing of well-established Arab male writers and describes the response of the publisher: "The editor said: "there are three things wrong with the idea. He's male. He's old and he writes short stories. Can you find a young female novelist?"[120]

Similarly, in a discussion with the literary journal *Banipal* over the pitfalls in publishing Arab literature in translation, Zelfa Hourani, Editor at Quartet Books, comments that "my experience is that anything by women is going to sell, but short stories by men, for instance, is a kiss of death."[121] These comments reflect a widely held belief that Arab

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[117] Peter Clark, "Contemporary Arabic Literature in English," *The Linguist* 36, no. 4 (1997).
[118] *Ibid*
[119] Ibid
[120] *Ibid.* The question of the marketability of women writers is not restricted to Arabic literature. Deborah Moggach, Chairman of the Society of Authors accuses publishers of systematically putting youth and beauty before literary ability. "Being young and photogenic is a fantastic advantage," says Moggach. "So you have to be either young or beautiful or already a celebrity" (Edinburgh Metro, Oct 2000).
[121] Zelfa Hourani, "Short stories by men is a kiss of death", *Banipal*, no. 2 (June 1998): 78.

women writers have assimilated into this pre-existing literary category of feminism with relative ease when compared to their male counter-parts.[122]

Finally, it is worth noting that some commentators believe that the aforementioned ease of assimilation has at times been achieved at the expense of literary merit. Mai Ghoussobi, co-founder of Saqi Books, the first Arab bookshop and publishing house in London, makes the following comment: "novels that are published by very good [Arab female] novelists didn't sell, but those which had a big screaming cause did".[123] In this sense one may argue that all Arab women's novels, with their daring portrayal of female sexuality and social and cultural dilemmas, may owe their translated existence and any market success they achieve more to admiration for the authors' courage as outspoken Arab women addressing feminist issues rather than to the opinions of literary critics.

2.8.4 Influence of Orientalism on universalist Western feminism in the 1970s and 1980s.

Universal feminism failed in its aspiration to bring together all women of all cultures in a common feminist discourse. Generally speaking, universalist feminism came under fire in the late 1980s and in the 1990s by postcolonial feminist scholars who questioned the way in which translated texts were represented and introduced to Western audiences

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[122] Al-Haasn Golley argues that this long-term process of market creation should not be forgotten when looking at why individual books were translated in the 1980s and 1990s. Speaking of el-Saadawi's *Memoirs of Women Prison*, he comments: "This market lies behind the translation of *Memoirs of Women Prison* in the first place" Nawar Al-Hassan Golley, *Reading Arab Women's Autobiographies*: *Shahrazad Tells Her Story* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 164.

[123] Mai Ghoussobi, "A Cultural Mirror," *Banipal*, no. 1 (February 1998): 69-70.

by reviewers and scholars. Being post-colonialists, their arguments were based on power structures between dominant and dominated cultures and so naturally their analysis of Western feminists' treatment of the Orient's texts was based on the dynamics of Orientalism. Thus their argument essentially maintained that the horizon of expectation of feminists looking at Arab female writers was influenced heavily by Orientalist discourse. [124]

This influence has been usefully described as producing what Multi-Douglas termed to be "Orientalist feminism", a term which I shall adopt in particular in chapter III in relation to the feminist reception of el-Saadawi's work:

> These arguments seek to force the discussion of Arab women (whether by Arabs or by non-Arabs) into a rigid and politically loaded binarism: on the one hand, positive appreciations that easily turn into apologies, and on the other, critical assessments that are characterized as attacks. A pernicious label has even begun to be attached to such critical assessment: Orientalist feminism.[125]

In other words, Western feminists were unable to escape the long established Orientalist tradition of Westerners perceiving "the East" as a single inferior culture. Assuming the role of the knowledgeable, Western feminists effectively adopted a missionary role.[126]

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[124] In relation British feminists seeking to achieve the goal of creating a universalist feminist discourse, I would stress that another key factor can also explain why this goal was not achieved, namely the failure of feminists to take into account the issue of class and race. Black British feminism criticised the way in which white middle-class feminism did not "speak to the experiences of Black women and where it attempts to do so it is often from a racist perspective and reasoning" (Amos, 17). "We fight politically side by side with other oppressed people like black women, immigrants, black men, the mine workers and their wives. We struggle against racism, class oppression and sexual oppression. Our enemy is never the man, as the white feminists seem to think." (Quoted in el-Saadawi, *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader*, 272).

[125] Fadawa Multi-Douglas, *Men, Women, and God (s)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 15.

[126] I am aware of the problems involved in reaching generalisations in this way. As el-Saadawi herself has pointed out, right from the beginning of her success some Western feminists could be considered to be

They regarded their interaction with Arab women to be one of an informed party educating the uninformed (and therefore inferior) other party, and not one of two parties communicating within the spirit of a genuine notion of equal sisterhood.[127]

This quasi-missionary role manifested itself, at least in its initial stages in the 1970s and 1980s, in various forms. I have identified two of the main ones: Western feminists' treatment of feminists from the Third World Third at international conferences and the tendency of Western feminists to focus on specific issues faced by women from the Third World in isolation from the cultural context within which those issues arose.

(i) Treatment of Third World Feminists at international conferences

Women and feminists from the Third World were invited to international feminist conferences as guests rather than as participants. El-Saadawi and Fatima Marnessi, both

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more politically orientated: "they know how to combine the personal with political, not to divorce these things." *ibid, Interview, p.186.* By political orientation I take el-Saadawi to mean an approach which takes into account economic and political factors such as class when dealing with any given feminist topic. Broadly speaking, she acknowledges here that despite the shortcomings of many feminists in the early 1980s, there already existed a group of academics who were not 'Orientalised' and who recognised the possibility of feminist international solidarity being constructed on the basis of a recognition of the equality of all women seeking to analyse the particular issues specific to their culture.

[127] Chandra Talpade Mohanty has criticised western feminist discourse which for her "colonizes an entity called Third World Women, casting her as silent victim in need of discursive succour from her more liberated Western sisters". Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse." In *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Talpade, Ann Russo, and Lourades Torres, eds. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991), 51-80. El-Saadawi herself, somewhat optimistically, failed to pick up on this point and praised the 'International Women's Decade' (1975-1985) in which women of the 'North and the South' came together and managed to "raise issues related to social justice, peace and development". Nawal el-Saadawi, *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader* (London and New York: Zed books, 1997), 32.

of whom attended such conferences, claimed that Western feminists simply refused to listen to such women, choosing to ignore their analysis of their own social realities. Following the Wellesley Conference held in Boston, Massachusetts, between 2 and 6 June 1976 entitled 'Women and Development', el Saadawi wrote a joint letter with Fatima Mernissi and Mallica Vajrathon to the organisers in which they argued that the level of participation by Third World invitees through the presentation of papers had been very limited. They claimed that Western women had dominated the stage, even when discussing issues related directly to the lives and cultures of Third World Women and that their request for more time to discuss such issues after the end of the presentations had been denied.[128]

El-Saadawi later noted that at the Wellesely Conference she found herself "sitting in the audience listening to an American woman speak about Egypt. She had spent three months in Egypt. She wrote a book and there she was preaching and teaching about Egypt." [129]

At the 1980 UN conference[130], el-Saadawi made the point of speaking out against what she labelled "neo-colonialism in the name of feminism" and called for its elimination:

> I raised this issue and said that, at these international conferences, you listen to us because we know about our problems and how to diagnose them and you speak about your own problems in your own countries, and don't speak about

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[128] El-Saadawi, *The Nawal el Saadawi Reader*, 143.
[129] Nawal el-Saadwi, "Out of Egypt": A Talk with Nawal el Saadawi," interview with Nawal el-Saadawi by Tiffany Patterson and Angela Gillam, Freedomways 23 (1983), 186, 190-91.
[130] UN Med-Deacde Conference, June Copnhagen, 1980

> my problems. This sort of neo-colonialism in the name of feminism has to go.[131]

Writing on the same issue in the 1990s, again criticising Western feminists' failure in the 1970s to generally acknowledge that Third World women could fight their own battle, el-Saadawi stated that Western feminists believed that "the feminist struggle in the practical and ideological fields are limited to the Western capitalist world." El-Saadawi also refuted the Western feminists' opinion that "women's liberation movements in other countries owe their impulsion and their ideas exclusively to what has been done, said or written by feminists of the First World". [132]

By way of specific example, el-Saadawi refers to a left-wing feminist, Sheila Rowbotham, who states that "demands like monogamy, birth control, education, the right to organize were borrowed from Western capitalism." [133] For el-Saadawi, Rowbatham's reference to the origin of these issues involves a denial of the fact that these issues were also present in and recognised by Third World cultures well before and independently of Western feminist discourse.

(ii) Western feminists focusing on specific Third World women's issues out of context

The second example of the quasi-missionary Orientalist role played by Western feminists in the 1970s and early 1980s can be found in the way in which they focused on

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[131] Patterson and Gillam, 186.
[132] El-Saadawi., *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader*, 280.
[133] Ibid., 280.

specific issues affecting Third World women, rather than engaging in a holistic discussion of those women's contexts, cultures and associated gender issues.

In addressing issues which they believed stood in the way of Arab women's liberation, Western feminists concentrated above all on sexual or symbolic cultural issues and thereby disregarded the multifaceted nature (political, economic, cultural) of the phenomenon of women's oppression in the Arab world.

El-Saadawi identifies this group of women as "feminists for sexual liberation and sexual identity". She notes that this group, present at the 1980 UN conference, was caught up in a new type of slavery where they become obsessed with sex and sexual preferences, and where the question of whether one was heterosexual, homosexual or a lesbian became the centre of their discussion. In el-Saadawi's view, "to think that just by identifying yourself sexually you are political and liberated - this is not right."[134]

By way of more specific example, clitoridectomy and the veil were presented as isolated issues with an implication pervading Western feminist discourse that, if addressed, would lead to a significant improvement in the lives of Arab women. As Mabro states:

> By throwing off the veil or the fetters of genital mutilation women would not suddenly acquire the economic independence, food and peace which many of

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[134] Patterson and Gillam, 187.

> them (third world feminists) considered to be the issues that should be dealt with first.[135]

Furthermore, Western feminists turned the veil into a symbol of religious oppression and the social segregation of women, thereby implying that the oppressed state of Arab women was explicable exclusively through reference to the Islamic culture of their societies. [136] This embodies a Western tendency to characterise Arab women's suffering as limited to their particular socio-religious societies.[137] As Cobham, a major translator of Arabic literature, writes regarding about Western reactions to el-Saadawi's work:

> Although it may be relatively easy for women in the West to identify with the suffering of Third World women, there has also been a tendency for many Western women to distance themselves from the experiences of al-Saadawi's characters by confining them to a particular socio-religious context.[138]

2.8.4.1 Orientalist influence on feminism in the 1970s and 1980s in relation to the reception of Arab women writers in the West

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[135] Judy Mabro, *Veiled Half-Truths, Western Travellers' Perceptions of Middle Eastern Women* (London: New York: I.B Tauris & Co Ltd, 1996), 2.

[136]By focusing on the symbolic value of the veil, western feminists have failed to consider what the veil represents for the majority of Arab female. The influential Moroccan sociologist, Fatima Mernissi, notes that the veil "can be an outward symbol of a woman's religious faith and a marker of her modesty, and is also in its wider connotation, partition that protects the secular from the profane." Daphne Grace, *The Woman in the Muslin Mask: Veiling and Identity in Postcolonial Literature* (London. Sterling. Virginia: Pluto Press, 2004), 16.

[137]Concerning the way in which Arab women's oppression is explained as an inherent characteristic of Islamic culture and how this type of explanation remains entrenched in the discourse of some western commentators with access to the mainstream media, I would refer to the Kilroy-Silk's brandishing of Arabs as "suicide bombers, limp amputators, women repressors". Kilroy Silk, "We owe Arabs nothing'," *The Sunday Express*, 4 January 2004 and 6 April 2003.

[138] Cobham private correspondence, 23 April, 2003.

Some scholars believe that Western feminism purposefully and consciously concentrated on specific topics such as the veil in order to create a distance between Western and Oriental women, and that the overall purpose of doing so was to facilitate Western women's' attainment of self-definition by implying that they had moved beyond such a state of oppression. This process involved a conscious portrayal of Arab women's experience in a way that naturally distanced it from any Western experience.[139]

According to this analysis, feminists are engaging in the very essence of Orientalist definitions of "otherness" and using associations surrounding specific symbols and issues such as the veil to achieve this. Grace for example argues that "the veil is central to the discourses of West versus east, democracy versus fundamental Islam, and still remains an icon of the otherness of Islam and a symbol of Muslim women's oppression."[140] Similary, Leila Ahmad argues that "the thesis of the new colonial discourse of Islam centred on women [and maintained] that Islam was innately and immutably oppressive to women, that the veil and segregation epitomized that oppression".[141]

In the same vein, some scholars argue that Western feminists' analysis of Third World women's issues has involved creating a composite and monolithic category for analysis. Thus, in the minds of those consciously or subconsciously adopting this approach, the

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[139] Catherine Cobham points out that for Western feminists, it is "perhaps easier or more gratifying to look at problems which have some relation to your own, but which you perceive as more clear-cut and extreme". Private correspondence, 23 April 2003.

[140] Daphne Grace, *The Woman in the Muslin Mask: Veiling and Identity in Postcolonial Literature* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 12.

[141] Ahmed, 151-152.

experience told by a single Third World female character begins to represent all realities of all Third World women. Arab women's literature in general (in particular the works of el-Saadawi, al-Shaykh and Khalifa) becomes responsible for constructing a definitive reality of Arab culture in the minds foreign readers.[142] This interpretation of Arab literature is reinforced by the feminist methodological preference for first hand individual female narrative as a strong source of evidence for reaching broad feminist conclusions.

The conclusion of the above analysis is clear: in their attempt to include the voice of the Arab woman as part of their construction of universalist feminist knowledge, quasi-missionary feminists were not able to transcend the Orientalist discourse governing the beliefs of the reality of the Arab world. Thus instead of identifying with the Arab woman's struggle against political, economic and cultural oppression, which they themselves as Westerners challenge, they focused on Islamic culture as the cause of the Arab woman's oppression and thereby presented Arab women through the prism of "the other" rather than through the desired prism of universalist sisterhood.

Thus, according to this analysis, for an Arab female writer's book to be successful with a Western feminist audience in the 1980s, the writer needed to bear two ingredients in

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[142] Plato recognized the power of fictional narratives, asserting in his 'Republic' that "those who tell the stories also rule society." Motion pictures, like composed stories, function as visual lesson plans and last forever. Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (New York, Northampton: Olive Branch Press, 2001), 5.

mind in order to make a breakthrough: firstly to address Arab feminist issues and secondly to address them in way that would facilitate an Orientalist reaction.

2.8.5 Summary comments on my view of feminism's degree of independence from the Orientalist discourse

In the subsequent chapters I shall be arguing that the above analysis, which holds that Feminism has been infiltrated by Orientalist discourse and considerations across the board and that Arab female writers had to adapt to the implicit demands of Orientalist feminists, is too black and white.

The basic premise of my argument will be that a shift in the reactions of Western feminists to Arab female writing can be perceived over time. For example, feminist reactions to el-Saadawi in particular in the early 1980s were heavily characterised by the influence of Orientalism. In the 1990s this shifted to a more nuanced reception involving both feminist and Orientalist discourse.

According to some, such a shift could be explained by a more general shift in the 1990s in feminist reactions to writings by Middle Eastern women. This shift can be seen in a number of ways.

Firstly, editors of academic texts brought together feminists' scholastic analysis to "emphasise diversity and the particular physical and social environment in which Middle

Eastern Muslim women live".[143] In other words, whereas before, an Arab protagonist might have been taken to represent all Arab women, over time the analysis became more subtle by distinguishing between the wide variety of social realities within the Arab world, as well as by highlighting differences within the same culture arising from race and class differences.

Secondly, some scholars, such as D. Royer, provide a cultural context for prospective readers of Arab novels. In her introduction into *A Critical Study of the Works of Nawal El Saadawi, Egyptian Writer and Activist* Royer notes that "as a companion for reading her fiction and non fiction, this volume contextualizes her work by taking into consideration the complexities of Egyptian society today." [144]

Thirdly, in the 1990s categories of expertise involved in looking at the work of the writers I have selected below do not all invoke the same discourse. For example, in the case of el-Saadawi, I will show that whilst some feminist reviewers did indeed draw upon the Orientalist discourse, others ignored her political content in order to focus more specifically on straightforward feminist themes. In the case of al-Skeikh, I will show that the Orientalist discourse was prevalent in reviews of her work while academic commentary tended to invoke a feminist analysis.

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[143] al-Ali, 13.
[144] Diana Royer, *A Critical Study of The Works of Nawal El Saadawi, Egyptian Writer and Activist.* Lewiston (Queenston, Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press , 2001), 5.

Fourthly, Western feminists' writings began to contextualise their analysis of Arab women's issues within the larger framework of analysis of war and imprisonment. For example, Mariam Cooke analysed the writings of Arab women who were contextualising their fellow Arab women's daily experience in this way. In 1987 Barbara Harlow, who was interested in the writings of women from the developed world who addressed the topic of their experiences under oppressive governmental regimes and authoritarian states, published *Resistance Literature*. Harlow expanded in her work the analysis of the situation of women in the Third World to include the impact of political and economic pressures on their lives. This process expanded Western feminist writers' interest in representing the Arab woman as a figure who was more than just a victim of an oppressive family setting. For Harlow "women's prison writings from the Third World represent a twofold challenge to Western theoretical developments, both literary critical and feminist."[145]

Finally, academic analysis has clearly developed a greater awareness of the need for Western commentators to take into account culturally-specific factors that are essential to an intellectually-rigorous analysis of any given feminist issue faced by women in non-Western cultures. By way of example, Diana Royer (who has discussed the teaching of foreign texts, including those of el-Saadawi in the US), notes:

> Unless these books also offer the cultural context apparatus by which students and teachers alike may engage with the texts on their own terms (and most books do not delve into the social, political, economic, religious, gender issues,) the

[145] Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* (New York and London: Methuen. 1987).

> experience will be reduced to an unsatisfying and potentially estranging one of readers noting superficial similarities to and differences from their own lives.[146]

Similarly, Obioma Nnaemeka discusses the difficulties in teaching African women's writings at American universities and the challenges faced both by the teacher and native African students when arguing against the simplistic stereotypical discussions of African women's lives in texts and films. She has noted that, "the teacher who survives must also be a diplomat and psychologist."[147] Commenting on her teaching of *The Hidden Face of Eve* within the contexts of the issue of circumcision she notes:

> There are other aspects of teaching connections which I apply to my teaching of clitoridectomy. I teach clitoridectomy in tandem with teaching abuses of the female body in other cultures: forms of plastic surgery in the West and foot-binding in China. [148]

The essence of my argument in this section has been to show that since the late 1970s, both feminism and Orientalism have proved important roles in the reception of Arab female writing in the West. Western feminist interest in and reaction to Arab female writing was heavily influenced by an orientalist discourse, highly prevalent in Western culture in general. However, I have also argued that over time the degree of Orientalist discourse waned, and it has become increasingly possible to make serviceable distinctions between feminism and Orientalism were the former increasingly mattered in reception.

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[146] Royer, 4.
[147] Obioma Nnaemeka, *Bringing African Women into the Classroom: Rethinking Pedagogy and Epistemology, 301-319 in Borderwork: Feminist Engagements with Comparative Literature, ed Margaret R. Higonnet* (*Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press,* 1994, Higonnet,1994), 312.
[148] ibid., 314.

2.9 Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been to set out aspects of a number of theories upon which I will draw in later chapters when looking at the factors influencing the Western reception of the works of el-Sadaawi, al-Shaykh and Khalifa.

The underlying aim of doing so is to show that the reception of such works into the receiving culture is not just a linguistic phenomenon but rather, in line with Polysystems Theory as developed by the Manipulation Theory, a multi-faceted phenomenon which involves a number of factors influencing that reception.

I have pointed to a number of elements within Manipulation Theory and the Horizon of Expectation Theory, in order to use them to theoretically locate the key factors of ideology and the role of readers, reviewers and academics.

Ideology (Manipulation Theory and Horizon of Expectation Theory)

Firstly, both theories encompass the notion of ideology and discourse as key factors in explaining the fortune of a translated text in a foreign literary system. I have set out how Manipulation Theory relates a culture's dominant discourse and/or ideology to the various elements of a literary system (most notably the persons/institutions acting as patrons and categories of expertise such as academics and reviewers within that system),

and how the notion of a broad socio-cultural horizon of expectation theory also draws upon ideology and discourse to explain the frame of mind of the receiving reader. I have referred to both Orientalism and feminism as examples of such ideologies and discourses.

Political factors (Horizon of Expectation Theory)

Secondly, in placing Segers' and Jauss' insights together, I explained how political events can constitute a key factor in shaping or reinforcing a readership's preparedness to accept a foreign text. I will draw upon this factor in the cases of all three writers covered below.

Reviews and readers (Manipulation Theory and Horizon of Expectation Theory)

Thirdly, through focusing on the reader's mind and its prejudices and how categories of expertise in the system take this into account, both theories identify reviewers as key figures in explaining the fate of a text. In all subsequent chapters, I will turn to reviews in order to give concrete examples of how this process functions.

Academics (Manipulation Theory)

Finally, Lefevere's Manipulation Theory has helped to locate academics within a literary system and argues that the focus of their work, as with the focus of reviewers, is

indicative of a culture's ideological trends. With this in mind, I will analyse academic reviews in all subsequent chapters as an indicator of the context within which the reception of the three authors' works has taken place.

Conjunctural Factors

In addition to these four factors identified in the theory, reference should be made at this point to two additional factors which I will argue affect the way in which the texts of the writers I have selected have been received in the West: the presence of an author in the host culture and their interaction with key actors in the literary circuit. For ease of reference and when suitable, I will refer to these two factors under the heading of "conjunctural-factors".

On the basis of these five factors then, I will turn to the three key Arab female writers I have selected for the purpose of exploring the reception of Arab writing in the West.

In chapter 3, dealing with the success of Nawal el-Saadawi, I will explore how Orientalism and feminism interacted as the two main powerful factors at work in relation to the reception of her writings. In so doing I will look at how a major political event affected one of these two ideologies and will also consider the importance of another factor, namely the author's intermittent presence in the West.

In chapter 4, dealing with the success of Hanaan al-Sheikh, I similarly look at the roles played by Orientalism and Feminism, and also consider the impact of two additional important factors, namely her presence in London and the First Gulf War.

In chapter 5, dealing with the success that the Palestinian writer Sahar Khalifa achieved with a more narrow audience than the previous two writers, I note that neither the Orientalist nor the feminist discourse played a major role in the reception of her work. Instead I look at how her work was reviewed and discussed by academics and reviewers through a hybrid discourse consisting of anthropological and political considerations. Only one piece of her writing was translated into English, a fact which stands in contrast to el-Saadawi and al-Sheikh. I explore this contrast considering whether it is the excessive politicisation of her work and the absence of both an Orientalist and/or feminist discourse to support it that allows us to locate an explanation for the way in which she was received.

Chapter 3 – Feminist Alliance: The reception of Nawal el-Saadawi

3.1 Aim and Structure

In this chapter I will look at the reception of Nawal el-Saadawi in the Western literary system. The overall aim of this chapter is to look at how the ideologies and associated discourses of feminism and Orientalism, viewed as examples of Lefevere's category of ideological patronage, played a dual role in creating an environment for el-Saadawi's work. These ideologies allowed el-Saadawi's work to be successfully received into the Western literary system, and by the feminist academic readership in particular. Through looking at reactions to her first two works translated into English in 1980 and 1982, and then her later works in chronological order of publication in English, I will show and argue that over time feminism has increasingly disassociated itself from its original tendency in the early 1980s to bring to bear an Orientalist framework of analysis to el-Saadawi's reception.

El-Saadawi's success in the West began in 1980. Before looking at the circumstances surrounding her success in that year and her subsequent reception in the West, I will first set out a brief introduction to the writer herself, and to the political, social and literary context of her life and work before 1980. I will also look at her medical background. The overall purpose of doing so is to set out the context in which she began to write and to highlight the principle themes of her earlier writing in order to provide a broad

contextual basis which I will use to criticise some of the ways in which she has been received (section 3.2).

Although I will go on to critique the Orientalist and feminist elements in the reception of her individual books, I will first turn to the traditional explanation given for her successful reception in the West, namely that her work was received in the West through an Orientalist lens (section 3.4). I think it is important to set out this traditional explanation, firstly because my argument is that Orientalism is relevant (but not sufficient in itself) to explain her success, and secondly because in so doing I will make clear that as an explanation it not only works in relation to reactions in the early 1980s but also that when looking at reactions to her later works it becomes less convincing.

With this in mind, and in order to reveal fine-grained changes over time, sections 3.5 and 3.6 will look at the reception of *The Hidden Face of Eve* and *Women at Point Zero* respectively, with both sections dividing the reactions to those books between those of an Orientalist and those of a feminist nature. As I will have made clear in section 3.2, these two works are el-Saadawi's major publishing successes in the West, which is why they merit separate analysis from the rest of her English publications. The stature and importance of Nawal el-Saadawi's work, both in general and in terms of the larger argument of this thesis, also justify the detail that this chapter goes into.

In section 3.7 I will turn to the reception of her works published in English after *Women at Point Zero,* again splitting the reactions into those of an Orientalist and those of

feminist nature. Section 3.8 draws together some conclusions about her reception in the Western literary system.

3.2 General introduction to el-Saadawi

Having first set out a brief general introduction to el-Saadawi, I will turn to the political, social and literary context of her life and work before 1980, the year in which she achieved success in the West. I will also look at her medical background as I will be drawing upon this in later sections.

3.2.1 General introduction to el-Saadawi

El-Saadawi is undisputedly the most successful Arab female writer in the West. Since the introduction of her work to the West through *The Hidden Face of Eve* in 1980, most of it has been translated into English and other languages. When a new publication of her work enters the Western literary market, it is automatically and comprehensively reviewed by major sources of reviews such as the *Third World Quarterly* and *Women's Review.* She is regularly interviewed and reviewed by the BBC, including on Woman's Hour, and her work is covered by major UK broadsheets such as the *The Guardian*. She has experimented with short stories and frequently writes essays that are both cultural and political in nature. My working hypothesis is that both academic and educated feminist readerships (not mutually exclusive categories of course) combined to form the bulk of the relevant audience for el-Saadawi from the 1980s to the present. Certainly, el-Saadawi's work began to be noticed in academic curricula from the mid-1980s onwards:

her work is present on a substantial number of academic courses dealing with feminist studies in general and courses focusing on the Arab or Islamic world in particular, in addition to being the topic of Ph.D theses on feminism in the modern Arab world. However, evidence drawn from advertising and review locations does not permit us to argue that academia then bore the full weight of ongoing interest in el-Saadawi's work. To pick one representative example, *The Circling Song* is advertised with el-Saadawi's other novels in *The Feminist Book Store News*, Vol 12, No. 1 (May/June 1989), in *Everywoman* (September 1989) and a quotation of the novel is presented in *Spare Rib Diary*, August 1990, a radical feminist journal catering mostly to non-academic audiences.[149] Hence it is difficult to provide clear evidence of a general shift towards the academy in the reception of her work.

El-Saadawi was born in Kafr Tahla located in Lower Egypt's Delta. Her father worked much of his life as a civil servant at the Ministry of Education. Her mother, who did not undertake waged work, came from an upper middle-class family.[150] In 1949 she entered medical school at the University of Cairo, receiving her M.D. in 1955. Later she studied at Columbia University, New York, receiving her Masters in Public Health in 1966. Her marriage to Ahmed Helmi, a medic-student and freedom fighter, ended in divorce. Her second husband was a wealthy traditionalist, whom el Saadawi divorced when he did not

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[149] Most of her work post *Woman at Point Zero* books are advertised in feminist journals such as, Feminist Book Fortnight and the International Feminist Book Fair, both of which aim at promoting feminist publishing. Listed under "Fiction", el-Saadawi's *Searching* is advertised in *Feminist Book Fortnight* 91, *Spare Rib*, June 1991 and in *Feminist Bookstore News*, volume 14, no 1, May/June 1991.

[150] El-Saadawi's parental background and her experience at school exposed her to the issue of class. Her mother's family took an arrogant attitude towards her father's more modest background and at school she witnessed the way in which teachers engaged in favouritism with the daughter of local Chief of Police (Nawal el-Saadawi, interview by author, 10.03.2005, London).

accept her writing. In 1964 she married Sherif Hetata, a physician and novelist, who has translated several of her books into English.

Much of what informs el-Saadawi's work is her experience as a medical doctor and qualified psychiatrist in Egypt. Her work with her patients, particularly in rural areas, provided her with great insight into the reality of women's lives and into their reaction to that reality. She was thus able to put together a rich collection of information usually hidden beneath society's surface, and beneath traditions of shame and family honour. It was particularly the fact that she addressed customs involving the abuse of women's sexuality that was groundbreaking, because of the difficulty women had in even speaking about such issues, let alone challenging them.

Her candid discussions of the sexual exploitation and experiences of Egyptian women, most notably in *Women and Sex* (1972), led (in the year of publication) to her dismissal from the Ministry of Health where she had worked as Director of Health Education since 1958. For the same reason, she lost her post as Chief Editor of a health journal and as Assistant General Secretary of the Egyptian Medical Association. As I will argue below, the credibility attached by Western feminists to her writing can largely be explained by the authority she projects as a medical doctor with access to first hand experience from the women about whom she writes.

By 1983 el-Saadawi had been recognised as the unquestioned spokeswoman for Arab women in the West. *Spare Rib* described her as the "leading African and Arab feminist

... a qualified psychiatrist, and one of the most highly educated Egyptian women."[151] Her successful career as an international feminist activist[152] is demonstrated both through the number of her books that have been translated into English and other languages, and through a number of awards including the Supreme Council Award for the Arts and Social Sciences in 1974, the Literary Award of the Franco-Arab Friendship Association, Paris, France in 1982 (for *Women at Point Zero*), the Khalil Gibran Literary Award in 1988 and the Arab Association of Australia Award, also in 1988. In 2004 she won the North-South Centre of Europe Prize for her demonstration of "leadership in the fight for women's rights and ...passionate commitment to global interdependence and solidarity."[153] She has been awarded three honorary doctorates in the West, the most recent from St. Andrews University in Scotland.

I will now summarise briefly el-Saadawi's early writing and its context. Again, the purpose of doing so is to provide a broad contextual basis for my criticism of the ways in which she has been received.

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[151] "Nawal Practising Feminism", interview with el-Saadawi in *Spare Rib,* no. 169 (August 1986): 14-17.
[152] El-Saadawi was United Nations Advisor for the Women's Programme in Africa (ECA) and the Middle East (ECWA) from 1979 to 1980. She also co-founded the African Women's Association for Research and Development in 1977 and the Arab Women's Solidarity Association in Egypt in 1982.
[153] "Fuel for controversy," *Al-Ahram,* no. 703 (12-18 August 2004).

3.2.2 Political and social context

In December 2004, Nawal el-Saadawi announced that she would stand in the Egyptian presidential elections. In an interview with *al-Hayat*, [154] she immediately made clear that in so doing, her aim was not to win the presidency. She stated that she was fully aware of the impossibility of such a thing happening, given her strong criticism of American imperialism and of the effects of neo-liberal globalisation on the Egyptian economy. Instead her stated aim was, and remains, to vocally criticise the present economic state and the oppressive political environment in Egypt. She went on to set out more details of the reforms she believes to be necessary, which led her interviewer to imply that her manifesto was in some senses utopian. She replied in a way that could be read as reflecting her firm convictions and radical stance in defiance of popular norms, stating that her aim was to challenge the dominant rusting state apparatus and to expose social taboos in Egyptian society. A less charitable reading, articulated among her critics in the Egyptian press, saw her Presidential ambitions as the publicity stunt of a woman getting above her station.

The context for el-Saadawi's early socialist-feminist writing was that of Egypt in the 1960s and 1970s. Of particular significance for contextualising her work for the purpose of this thesis is the 1952 Nasser-led pan-Arab revolution and its demise in the early 1960s. Nasser's ideology and its discourse included supporting the notion of the emancipation of women, which had been advocated by a growing number of women

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[154] *al-Hayat* is a daily Lebanese newspaper.

from Egypt's upper-classes since the late 19th century, and enacting a substantial number of legislative provisions that granted women a right to full political participation, and an increased right of access to primary and secondary education.

These efforts to emancipate women succeeded to some extent: many women were able to take advantage of the rights which were set out in the laws, by beginning to work for the first time and by beginning to participate in some aspects of the national political process. However, these practical economic and political changes failed to create a shift in the underlying male and female approach to gender relations in Egypt, and so the strong, traditional and patriarchal structure was maintained, on family, small community and also national level.

In addition to this powerful social-cultural inertia against change in gender relations, the failure of the pan-Arab movement in the early to mid 1960s, and the devastating sense of national and cultural shame that accompanied the Israeli defeat of the Arab forces in 1967 led to a growing sense of social and political isolation amongst many Egyptian men. This led to the strengthening of the political Islamic group the Muslim Brotherhood, whose discourse, which was prevalent at a number of levels including at university level in Egypt's major cities, reinforced this traditional natural inertia right across Egypt and also sought to set back the reforms that had been introduced by Nasser.

This is reinforced by Sawsan al-Naji, who notes in her study on *The Egyptian Women and the Revolution:*

> The 1952 Revolution did not enjoy the complete faith [of the people] required to build the political and social thought [in their minds]. This led to a systematic set-back which later became apparent in the success of the traditional conservative element of society. This element was to take a hostile stance against women. [155]

This project attempted to increase the emancipation of women, and its failure is reflected both directly and indirectly in the writings of el-Saadawi. However, as we will see – particularly in the discussion of the reception of the *Hidden Face of Eve* – there is sometimes a failure by Western audiences to give this theme due importance.

There are a number of striking examples of el-Saadawi directly addressing the limited, rigid and inferior role given to women, which had resulted from the socially common misinterpretation of Islam by Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood (and other conservative elements in Egyptian society in the 1970s). Perhaps one of the most powerful examples is the way she uses the female figure in her writing to show the self-imposed limitations of a fundamentalist interpretation of religion in *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*:

> In prison, the only word I heard from Boduur was *haraam*. Everything to her was *haraam*, taboo. Even physical exercise: a woman must not swing or shake her body. To Boduur, laughter was taboo because a verse in the Qur'an says 'God does not love those who are merry.[156]

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[155] Sawsan Naji, 2002: 41, (author's translation).
al-Mar'a al-Miṣriya wa-al-thawra : Dirāsāt taṭbīqiya fī 'adab al-mar'a. 1. al-Qāhira: al-Majlis al-'ālī li thaqāfa, 2002.

[156] Nawal, el-Saadawi, *Memoirs from the Women's Prison,* Trans. Marilyn Booth (Women's Press, 1986), 37.

In *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*, el-Saadawi sets out her argument that religion is manipulated by states and fundamentalists for their own ends. In her reply to a policeman's question on the status allocated to women in Islam, states:

> "[Policeman], We are an Islamic nation. According to Islam, women are lacking in mental power and faith. Or, are you against Islam?
> [el-Saadawi], There is more than one Islam. Every state interprets Islam as it wishes. Isn't that so?" [157]

Most of el-Saadawi's efforts to isolate the role played by conservative religious elements in the deterioration of women's rights in Egypt are a natural part of her rich and complex analysis of the forces at play in Egyptian society, specifically, in relation to women.

To help locate el-Saadawi as part of a larger group of political commentators, it is helpful to refer to Scruton's identification of those intellectuals who engage in a culture of repudiation that involves a "cultural shift from the affirmation to the repudiation of inherited values."[158] Scruton uses the family as an example of a social unit to which both Marxists and later radical feminists have been opposed, and which they have undermined. El-Sadaawi's attack on society and specific traditional institutions such as marriage can be argued to fall within this model. I will argue that the mistake that many have made is to conclude that el-Saadawi extends this approach to Islam itself, across all time and space. They thereby fail to recognise that she limits her criticism of Islam and all other religions to patriarchal contexts that use religion to reinforce their oppressive

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[157] Ibid., 20.
[158] Roger Scruton, *The West and the Rest: Globalization and the Terrorist Threat* London. Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2002), 70.

structures. I will return to this below when looking at some of the more Orientalist reactions to her writings.

3.2.3 Literary context: "committed literature"

El-Saadawi's writings from the 1960s onwards fell within a genre of writing that was fully embraced by most Arab writers. This genre was characterised by its commitment to using fiction to reflect upon politics, and the way in which it dealt with society's main social challenges. The thinking behind the genre was that to write in this way constituted participation in the development of the social structure. It was referred to as "committed literature", a genre adapted from Russian literature following the translation of Andre Gadanof's writings in the late 1940s, which flourished in the Arab world particularly following the 1976 war.

Arab feminist writers adopted the genre to use fiction to reflect upon the challenges faced by millions of women in their daily relations and upon their position in society. El-Saadawi was one of a number of writers who became committed to this genre.[159]

El-Saadawi is clear that all of her writing is inseparable from politics. In a recent interview she asserts that she "never contemplated writing just for writing's sake. You

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[159] According to Joseph Zeidan, el-Saadawi was part of what he labels the second stage of the Arab women's novel, the 1950s and 1960s, when women rebelled against patriarchal standards and their novels "exposed patriarchy and its effects on women as individuals and declared the right to self determination for their heroines." Joseph Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists: The Formative Years and Beyond* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 235.

cannot say that writers live on an isolated planet – writing is not decoration, it is part of life".[160] No doubt making reference to her medical career, she compares a pen to a scalpel: "Words should not seek to please".[161] She also makes reference to *A Daughter of Isis*, the first part of her autobiography, in which she writes that words "should not hide the wounds in our bodies, the shameful moments in our lives."[162]

Dedications at the beginning of some of her books reflect that her writing falls within the "committed literature" genre. In her dedication in *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* she writes:

> To all who have hated oppression to the point of death, who have loved freedom to the point of imprisonment, and have rejected falsehood to the point of revolution. To everyone who raised a voice in protest and anger. When they broke down my door by force of arms and led me to prison on the sixth of September 1981…To all of those men and women, young people and children within Egypt and outside I dedicate this book.[163]

From the above introduction into the intensely political background of el-Sadaawi's fictional writing, namely her committed socialist thought coupled with feminist consciousness, I would argue that to approach her fiction without this background in mind would lead to a simplistic assumption that el-Saadawi is writing simply about isolated feminist themes amid an undifferentiated, 'backward' Islamic culture. Such an interpretation would fail to recognise that she

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[160] Amruta Slee. "Egypt's dissident daughter," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 August 2002, 51-54.
[161] Word Power: books to change our world, review of *Walking Through Fire: A Life of Nawal el-Saadawi*, by Nawal el-Saadawi. http://www.word-power.co.uk/catalouge/1842770772.
[162] Slee, "Egypt's dissident daughter", 51-54.
[163] El Saadawi, *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*, 1986.

is providing rich social commentary of a culturally specific nature, and that she is making a critique of the political and cultural forces underpinning female oppression in the Arab world.

3.3 Orientalism as explanation for el-Saadawi's Western success

The traditional explanation given for el-Saadawi's successful reception in the West is that her work was received there through an Orientalist lens. A number of commentators arguing this point have not only looked at how Western critics engaged in Orientalist discourse when receiving her work, but have also criticised el-Saadawi for writing, consciously or unconsciously, in a way that facilitates an Orientalist interpretation of her work. The specific methods she has been accused of using, whether intentionally or not, can be set out under a number of categories: appealing to Western stereotypes (addressed below in 3.4.1), limiting the choice of sources for her characters (3.4.2), stylistic weakness (3.4.3) and addressing inherently anti-Islamic themes (3.4.4). My purpose in this section is to summarize and critically evaluate these claims, arguing that it is too simple to relate her reception exclusively to Orientalism, and that those who wish to make this claim are guilty of reductionism and fail to give full weight to the possibility that other themes, especially feminism, might also inform the reading of her texts.

3.3.1 Appealing to Western stereotypes

El-Saadawi's success in Western literary circles has been viewed with a degree of scepticism, both by Arab critics, and to a lesser extent, by Western critics. A number of reactions to her work accuse her of dealing with gender-related topics in a way that plays to Western Orientalist stereotypes. These range from her description of Arab women's lives through her portrayal of Arab men, to the way in which she and her editors adapt her work for a Western audience, in order to fit particular stereotypes. Magda al-Nowaihi, for example, argues that el-Saadawi succeeded in acquiring a space within the Western readership because she reinforces a "certain stereotype the West holds of the Arab world, particularly in terms of its treatment of women."[164] For many, her success is simply the result of her explicit portrayal of Arab women's predicament, appealing to Western audiences with stereotypical expectations of what the lives of Arab women are like. As Amal Amireh, a major critic of el-Saadawi's work, puts it, "[el-Saadawi] is popular in the West partly because her works have played into Western prejudices."[165] For these critics, the appeal of her work is very specific to the Western perception of Arab women, rather than to a broader notion of the Arab world in general.[166] In other words, for these critics Orientalism is the dominant conceptual form of patronage that explains her success.

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[164] Slee, "Egypt's dissident daughter", 51-54.

[165] El-Saadawi's work, she concludes, "was conditioned by Western interest in and hostility to Islam. Amal Amireh. "Publishing in the West: Problems and Prospects for Arab women Writers," *Aljadid* 2, no. 10 (August 1996).

[166] The view that only texts that involve a portrayal of the violence committed against Arab women in the Arab world manage to attract the attention of the West, remains the central point in discussing the translation of Arab women writers into the West. At a conference on the translation of literary works from

Some of this critical commentary emphasizes the way el-Saadawi's work recycles racist images drawn from the colonial discourse. For example, Carol Bardenstein, of the Asian Studies Program at Dartmouth College, argues that her writing can "lend itself to being appropriated by segments of the [Western] audience for reinforcing stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims in general." By way of example she looks at *The Circling Song* and the way in which it portrays the rapist in terms of roughness and dark skin, whilst portraying the victim as white. She argues that with such an approach, el-Saadawi will encounter the accusation of playing to an Orientalist racial hierarchy whenever she addresses the plight of Arab women.[167]

One can understand Bardenstein's view that advocating a preference for white skinned females and portraying the aggressor as dark skinned bears a close resemblance to Orientalist imagery. However, I would draw attention to the fact that, although this controversial topic awaits significant scholarly attention, preference for fair skin is evident in the Arab world with a history of its own without any connection to Orientalism. This point of view rejects the Eurocentric narcissism in which the West is the root of all evil (as well as of salvation).

Arabic into English, held in Cairo in 2005, a female Arab author, named Hala Badr, expresses her concern at the state of translation of Arab women writers into English in the last 15 years. She also notes that with the exception of a few publishers, publishing houses generally only pay attention to works that contain themes of violence against women, female genital mutilation and other issues of this kind. *Al Hayat*, Cairo 26.02.05 / الحياة أمينة خيري) .

[167] Carol Bardenstein. "*The Circling Song*", *Middle East Journal* 44, no.1, (summer 1990): 526.

The most significant area of contention, however, refers to el-Saadawi's depiction of circumcision. Her chief critic in this domain is Janine Dallal, who argues that el-Saadawi and her editor are making conscious adjustments to her work in order to appeal to the Western stereotypes that form part of Western reader's horizon of expectation, in relation to the image of the Arab woman. In relation to *The Hidden Face of Eve*, Dallal gives two main sets of examples. Firstly, she argues that the issue of circumcision was over-exposed by reviewers in the English version of *The Hidden Face of Eve*. Dallal states that this was done consciously to appeal to the "prevailing socio-political views in the West" with regard to the difficult situation of women in the Middle East, thus disregarding the fact that the practice is mainly an African, rather than an Arab Islamic Middle Eastern, issue.[168] Secondly, Dallal refers to a number of mainly editorial changes that have been made to the English version of the book, such as the chapter heading *The Mutilated Half* replacing what in Arabic version is simply a chapter number. This editorial move arguably draws sensationalist attention to the issue of circumcision in the book. A second editorial example she gives is that the title has used the word "hidden", rather than the more obvious translation of the original Arabic word *'aari,* which would mean "naked". Dallal's argument here is that the Western readers would not want to read the word naked in relation to Arab women, because there are certain key words the Western mind associates with Arab women such as hidden and veiled.[169] Indeed, with Dallal's criticisms in mind, it might be tempting to see el-Saadawi's work in implausibly

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[168] Dallal, *al-Adab*, 54.
[169] Ibid., 54.

conspiratorial fashion, as merely an effective literary tool to help maintain the Orientalist discourse through use of "Arab insiders", rather than through "Western voyeurism".[170]

El-Saadawi's general response to such criticisms is that she is simply being honest and brave by airing issues which others prefer to avoid. As she told the *Sydney Morning Herald,* "there is always a danger of being misinterpreted, but I don't care about the danger, I have to be honest with my ideas, if some people twist them it is not my problem".[171] These claims are all very well, but they do not address the specific issue of editorial changes aimed at an audience with Orientalist preconceptions. In fact, Dallal's accusations, if accurate, would be a powerful example of Jacquemond's analysis which, as we saw in Chapter II, holds that one effect of the hegemonic relationship between the First and Third Worlds may be that writers from the latter adapt their writings to the demands of the former. El-Saadawi's larger point, however, lies in the assertion that the most important project is to open the space for a discussion of oppressive practices such as female circumcision, perhaps at some cost in terms of how they are framed for a Western audience. Indeed, the insistence on an reductionist Orientalist reading in respect of the whole issue of circumcision and its treatment in el-Saadawi's work avoids the possibility that themes of universal importance to feminists in many different global locations may have some importance. How can an adequate discussion of gender issues in the Middle East be conducted, one might point out, if all reference to issues merely

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[170] A specific example of such practice, to which I will draw attention below in Chapter III, is the way in which the feminist aspect of el-Saadawi's character and her writing is stressed far more than her leftist political views.
[171] Slee, "Egypt's dissident daughter", 51-54.

'of interest' to those influenced by Orientalism have to be ruled out of bounds. In fact, as I will detail below when discussing the reception of the *Hidden Face of Eve*, circumcision was an issue of major interest to feminists in the West in the early 1980s, and cannot simply be ignored as part of the explanation for el-Saadawi's success. Such a reading could not account for the specific place and prominence of circumcision, where Orientalism and feminism collide and mingle, if you will. It may be fair to say that el-Saadawi remains vulnerable to the suggestion that she plays into Orientalist stereotypes – not always through her explicit intention of course – but it is too simplistic to cite Orientalism as a blanket explanation for her reception in the West.

3.3.2 Limited choice of source for her characters

Further criticism levelled at el-Saadawi is that she chooses to create characters around underprivileged Arab women, rather than also choosing educated female figures as a source for her work. This supposedly reinforces an image of the hardship and subordination of women in the Arab world.

Ahdaf Soueif is one of the writers and critics who criticise the limits el-Saadawi places on the profile of the characters whose opinion she chooses to express through her writing. In relation to *Memoirs from the Women's Prison,* in which el-Saadawi narrates her experience and the experiences of other prisoners, Soueif comments that "the type of

women who come to life under Saadawi's touch" is limited.[172] Put more explicitly, Gallory notes that Soueif criticises el-Saadawi for not creating in her novel an independent voice for other educated famous women who were sharing her prison cell, such as Latifa al-Zayat. According to Soueif, those women are "reduced to the role of a chorus providing backing for Saadawi's courageous outspokenness".[173]

Two leading academics, Gallory and Accad, and some literary critics disagree with Soueif's assessment, and so do I. Gallory argues that whilst the other imprisoned educated women could have produced material from their experience as political prisoners,[174] el-Saadawi rightly chooses to give a voice to women in other cells who are uneducated, of impoverished backgrounds and who are in prison for committing non-political criminal offences. The character "Fathiyya-the-murderess", who killed her husband for raping their 9 year old daughter, serves as a good example.

We must, therefore, allow at least the possibility of an alternative reading, in which far from pandering to Orientalist stereotypes, el-Saadawi is taking a stand in favour of the under-privileged, and exposing important issues of poverty and class. Indeed, the general representation of women in el-Saadawi's novels is viewed by Gallory to be the work of a revolutionary radical feminist. In relation to *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, Gallory notes that the work is ground-breaking, "both in relation to gender

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[172] Nawar al-Hassan Golley, *Reading Arab Women's Autobiographies: Shahrazad Tells Her Story* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003), 157.
[173] ibid., 157.
[174] In fact al-Zaiat for example, one of el-Saadawi political prisoner cell mates, has written of her experience in the prison.

representation … and in relation to class." [175] In fact, it is one of el-Saadawi's distinctive merits that she discusses the dilemma of the peasants in Egypt, in contrast to the previous concentration by Arab feminists on mainly middle -class consciousness.[176] Moreover, if we agree with Ahdaf Soueif, we run the risk of arguing that *any* depiction of an Arab woman will fall into some trap or other associated with Orientalism – because of the latter's nature as a totalizing discourse. Indeed, by depicting in *The Map of Love* an educated, beautiful, accomplished Arab woman, the sister of the Pasha with whom Anna falls in love, Ahdaf Soueif herself falls victim to the same charge that: by attempting to rebut Orientalist stereotypes she remains squarely within Orientalism's terms of reference.

What undermines a reductionist Orientalist reading furthermore is the fact that in addition to feminist academics, literary critics have also seen el-Saadawi's work in terms of social critique. Literary critics have praised el-Saadawi for choosing to refer to rural Egyptians living in poverty as sources for her characters. In a review of *God Dies by the Nile*, Chris Searle writes the following of el-Saadawi's characters: "el Saadawi's achievement is to lay bare the thin flesh and huge passions of her characters, making a few lives in a small settlement speak of the breaking point and bursting forth of the

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[175] Al-Hassan Golley, 134.

[176] According to Djebar, '*Women at Point Zero*' renews a socio-literary understanding of contemporary Egypt which has long been mediated through the translations of three male writers.[176] For her, although these three works have presented the Egyptian female peasant in a real and multiple manner, the originality of *Woman at Point Zero* lies in "a look that upsets and cuts through the traditional sexual dichotomy of space, a look that impregnates so as to resist at all costs the suffocation. Novelty resides in the tone of a voice that does not sigh, that does not complain, that accuses." Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke, *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing* (London: Virago Press 1990), 392.

accumulated stamina and determination of an entire people."[177] Other reviewers also find her depictions of poverty credible, on account of el-Saadawi's professional experience. For example, Amruta Slee, a reviewer in the Australian *Sydney Morning Herald*, notes:

> Her writing and beliefs may not have had such power if she hadn't spent time in the clinics, witnessing how ordinary society operated. Her time as a village doctor in the late 1950s is a case in point: here was a brutal introduction to the lives of the rural poor, with women forming the bottom of the heap. [178]

In chapter 2, I referred to Lefevere's argument that reviewers focus on a particular aspect of a writer's character and will make that selection with conscious reference to the host society's existing ideology or belief-system, and with reference to what they believe to be readers' prejudices.[179] Therefore their focus on aspects of class and poverty in her work lead me to believe that reviewers are assuming that this will appeal to her Western audience – an important point in unpacking a reductionist Orientalist account of el-Saadawi's reception.

Bearing these criticisms in mind, I would argue that there are a number of commentators who recognise the social awareness that leads el-Saadawi to choose her characters in the way she does. I would also argue that many of her readers would no doubt agree and are attracted by this novelty. Therefore, far from being a technique playing to Orientalist

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[177] Chris Searle, "A Marriage against Oppression," review of *God Dies by the Nile*, by Nawal el-Saadawi. *African Times*, 3 4 1987, 1.
[178] Slee, "Egypt's dissident daughter", 52.
[179] Chapter 2, p.19.

discourse. This is more likely to be a factor in explaining the feminist interest in her work.

3.3.3 Stylistic Weakness

The reception of el-Saadawi's work is further charged with the accusation of Orientalism from another source. A number of critics, while eschewing substantial discussion of el-Saadawi's feminist orientation, claim that el-Saadawi's work is marked by stylistic weakness, and her alleged mediocre style of writing is overlooked by those all too eager to embrace the Orientalist stereotypes of the feminine extant in her writing. In other words, it is only by appealing to crude stereotypes that an unaccomplished author could achieve a wide circulation. For example, members of the younger generation of Arab women writers take a sceptical stand in relation to el-Saadawi's success in the West.[180] Whilst they acknowledge her iconic feminist role, they also "dismiss her as a novelist and view their generation of writers as superior representatives of Arab women's creativity."[181] Amireh notes that at the 'Translating the Life of the Arab Women' Conference in London, organized in conjunction with the new Garnet Series, the novelist Alia Mamdouh used the opportunity of an interview with *al-Hayat* to criticise the way al-Saadawi "turns creativity, which is imagination and living memory, into a laboratory to show the sick samples which are deformed, and which she represents

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[180] Amireh, "Publishing in the West", 2.
[181] Ibid., 2.

as generalized social types".[182] Amireh adds that Mamdouh is joined in this criticism by Ahdaf Soueif who states that "el-Saadawi writes good scientific research. But she writes bad novels."[183] Both Amireh and Alia Mamdouh go on to explain el-Saadawi's success in the West, notwithstanding her questionable style, as a result of her appeal to Orientalist discourse.[184]

In addition to these broad accusations of appealing to Western stereotypes of the Arab woman, el-Saadawi has also been accused of reinforcing these stereotypes through the specific literary style she adopts. As Souief states, "it is unfair that the West thinks that what she writes represents Arab women's creative writing."[185] By this I understand Souief to be saying that el-Saadawi's considerable success has reinforced the narrow horizon of expectation in Western readers' minds, particularly with regard to what is and is not acceptable or attractive in terms of themes and style within an Arab female novel. The consequence, according to Soueif, is that el-Saadawi has unwittingly denied to other Arab female writers space for further creativity or diversity.

However, I find Mamdouh's and Soueif's criticism of el-Saadawi's style problematic, on the basis that both writers agree that el-Saadawi is an iconic feminist figure but fail to apply this recognition analytically when looking at her work. I believe that the fact that

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[182] Article discussed in Amal Amireh, "Framing Nawal el Saadawi: Arab Feminisms in a Transnational World." Signs 26, no.1 Autumn 2000:59.
[183] Amireh, "Publishing in the West", 2.
[184] It is worth noting however, that Alia Madouh explains the western reception to her own work as a result of her apparent appeal within the Orientalist genre, rather than her aim to provide a challenging portrayal of the Arab woman, in contrast to the prevailing fixed portrayal of the Arab woman in the west. Ibid.
[185] Ibid.

el-Saadawi uses literature to raise social consciousness and awareness of feminist issues amongst the average Egyptian reader, redeems her choice of subject matter and her use of simple style. If her style did not achieve this aim, it would indeed be somewhat simplistic and mundane. Grace argues that "the importance of 'raw' experience translated into literature explains perhaps the appeal of el-Saadawi's novels for Egyptian readers and the success of her unrefined, often brutal, writing style."[186] We can see that this appeal extends to a feminist Western readership on the basis that her novel *Woman at Point Zero*, which is largely characterized by a brutal and direct style of imagery, is el-Saadawi's most read and re-printed work.

Indeed, those who recognise that el-Saadawi's fundamental aim is to convey a feminist message, also recognise that she uses a simplistic style as part of her method. For example, Nusrat Shaheen believes that "throughout [her work], el-Saadawi adopts a very accessible style of writing which succeeds in laying bare the complexities and intricacies of the global position of women."[187] Similarly, Amireh writes:

> Unlike the more academic writings of [Arab] radical feminists such as Fatima Mernissi and Khalida Said, [el Saadawi] writes in accessible language that is neither literary nor technical. Her simple diction, crisp sentences, and short paragraphs give her books a journalistic flavour and appeal to a wide reading public. [188]

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[186] Grace, 92.
[187] Nusrat Shaheen. review of *The Nawal el- Saadawi Reader* , by Nawal el-Saadawi, *International Journal of Cultural Studies* , 1997, 135.
[188] Amireh, "Framing Nawal el Saadawi", 215.

Literary reviewers, like the academic critics above, have expressed similar praise for el-Saadawi's writings. For the reviewers, el-Saadawi has provided strong feminist literature which is beautifully written. *Publishers Weekly* applauds her meticulous style in *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*, and her ability to move and engage the reader: "There is an honest, reflective quality to her writing, and her plight evokes outrage and sympathy".[189] And whereas *Publishers Weekly* may not be seen as the apogee of high-brow commentary, *The New York Times Book Review,* is quoted on the back cover of *God Dies by the Nile* as celebrating the directness and passion of her style: "Nawal el Saadawi writes with directness and passion, transforming the systematic brutalisation of peasants and of women into powerful allegory."[190] Similarly the *Morning Star* concludes that the huge strength of el-Saadawi's stories is in "the integrity and poetic clarity with which it describes simply being a child, for every work read becomes a text to crack the shell of the child in all of us, who is bursting to be the honest teller of our life and epoch".[191]

Papers as diverse as the committed *Morning Star* or the middle brow *The New York Times Book Review* highlight el-Saadawi's ability to "move", "engage", and provoke the reader's sympathy and imagination. By highlighting these points reviewers, who form a key element in Lefevere's control factor model due to their power of selection, in some respects publicize al-Saadawi as a committed realist writer. I

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[189] *Publishers Weekly*, *review of Memoirs From a Women's Prison, by Nawal el-Saadawi,* Editorial Reviews. Amazon.ca. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc. http: //www.amazon.ca/exec/obidos/ASIN/0520088875/qid=1144432148/sr=8-1/ref=sr_8_xs_ap_i1_xgl/702-7959035-5488818

[190] El-Saadawi, *God Dies by the Nile.*

[191] *The Morning Star*, 28 (2.01 2001).

believe that this critique would be to the taste of readers interested in committed literature. The only way to characterise the highly divergent positions of all these reviewers as falling within the Orientalist discourse, is to work with a notion of Orientalism that is simply too vague and catch-all as to be workable or valuable as a unit of analysis, where socially realist and feminist themes also surface in the work.

3.3.3 Inherently anti-Islamic themes reinforcing the Orientalist interpretation of reception

A further accusation that el-Saadawi plays to the Orientalist tune has been made by some Muslim academics, who argue that the very act of writing about feminist issues in the Arab world inevitably leads to a reinforcement of Western anti-Islamic sentiments. In other words el-Saadawi is being accused of failing to recognise that as an Arab woman, (i.e. *any* Arab woman) writing about Arab women's oppression within a culture dominated by Islam, she is inevitably setting herself up in the eyes of Orientalist Westerners as being an insider attacking the religion of Islam.

These critics accuse el-Saadawi, and other secular Arab intellectuals such as Fatima Mernissi (author of *The Harem Within*), of helping the internationalist/universalist feminist project, which they suggest is rooted in Christian theology and misogyny, and forms part of the general Western project to "de-Islamise" the Muslim world. In other words, el-Saadawi and other Arab intellectuals criticise, and thereby undermine, Islamic society throughout the world:

> An unveiled Muslim woman has erroneously been interpreted as a 'secular, liberal, enlightened and liberated' woman. This simplistic and superficial interpretation is purely aspirational and merely reflects the Western European preoccupation with conquering the perpetuated Muslim other.[192]

Another thought is added to this by a different reviewer, F.M. Jamelah from World Islamic Books. Jamelah singles el-Saadawi out for criticism on the basis that she writes about Arab women's oppression from a secular point of view, a viewpoint that attacks the role of religion as a cause of that oppression. Although recognising that el-Saadawi is "one of the most outstanding and famous feminists in the Arab world", Jamelah claims that her endeavours on behalf of women's liberation are framed within a misrepresentation of Islam, resulting from her "strict conformity with Marxist dialectical materialism".[193]

Jamelah claims that el-Saadawi is an example of the danger posed by allowing women into Islamic academia.[194] This criticism fits into a broader conclusion reached by Jamelah in other writings, namely that it is inappropriate for Western feminism or indeed Arab feminism, to attempt to analyse Islamic culture to any extent, on the basis that feminism "considers religion in general, and Islam, as merely products of human society rather than God."[195] She stresses that her opposition to such writing is not based

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[192] Mohammad Siddique Seddon. http://www.islamic foundation.org.uk/articles/UnveilingImperialConquest.htm

[193] Maryam Jameelah, review of *The Nawal el-Saadawi Reader*, by Nawal el-Saadawi, *The Muslim World Book Review*18, no.4, (Summer 1998):40.

[194] ibid., 40.

[195] ibid., 40.

on a notion of "female intellectual inferiority but rather [on] strong emotions clouding correct judgement and clear thinking about Islam".

The substance behind Jameelah's claim is that given Orientalist presuppositions, el-Saadawi's work could indeed be used to attack Islam, as I explore below when discussing *The Hidden Face of Eve.* However, as I shall also argue, this position is ultimately guilty of reductionism and over-zealous protectionism, and is almost impossible to falsify on its own terms, given its rigid assumption about an absolute division in culture and practice between Islam and the West. The fact that it is impossible to falsify this line of reasoning fatally flaws the scientific status of Jamelah's argument.

3.4 Feminist Patronage for El-Saadawi's Work

As will become apparent through looking at the reactions to her individual works, I will be showing that feminism was the main form of conceptual patronage underpinning the reception of el-Saadawi's work. There are, however, two main factors relating to the interest of feminism in her work that should be examined, before a closer analysis of the reactions to individual pieces of el-Saadawi's work can be undertaken: firstly the existence of the feminist knowledge vacuum in the early 1980s, and secondly the importance of the role played by aspects personal to her character and life, namely her personality, public role as political activist, status as an unapologetic Arab feminist, background as medical doctor and her presence in the West.

3.4.1 Filling the feminist knowledge vacuum

As I argued in chapter 2, feminism as a socio-political movement can be viewed as one of Lefevere's conceptual categories of patronage, namely that of ideology. The Western feminist movement championed the work of female writers as a source of evidence for understanding the universal female experience, which in their view had been long neglected. In so doing, it created a knowledge vacuum in relation to the works of women writers from the Third World, whose works Western feminists therefore began to celebrate and promote.[196] This process influenced key actors within the Western literary system as well as the horizon of expectation of a readership which I would group together under a heading of "feminist Western readers".

In sponsoring the translation of el-Saadawi's work for publication in 1980, Zed Books can be seen as one of the first key actors to have become aware of this process. In an interview with Julian Hoze of Zed Books, Hoze noted that in the 1970s and 1980s there was a change in cultural preferences. He stated that "a political need maps into a market opportunity" and that el-Saadawi was "a cutting edge at the start" of that process.[197] He

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[196] In an interview I held with el-Saadawi, I asked her how she came to the attention of Zed Books. She commented on the broad feminist interest in her first book even before it was translated into English, and she noted that a number of western intellectuals who visited her in Egypt were interested in the book (Nawal el-Saadawi, interview by author, 10.03.2005, London). Elizabeth Taylor was particularly interested and recommended the book to Doubleday Publishers. After they received a translation of the book undertaken by Dr. Sharif Hetata (el–Saadawi's husband) Doubleday requested that a number of changes and omissions be made. However, el-Saadawi refused and it was until some time later, Elizabeth Taylor took the translation to Zed Books.

[197] Julian Hoze, interview by author, 2 February 2005.

concluded that it would be harder for Zed Books to publish el-Saadawi successfully now because there is no space for her to step into. I understand his view to be referring to the vacuum feminism had developed in the late 1970s in relation to Third World Women's writings.

Zed Books' motivations for embracing the book (the recognition of the vacuum) is thus a good example of Even Zohar's theory as to how a foreign text entering a less receptive system, such as the Western literary system, at times does not end up in a peripheral position and instead assumes an important position due to filling a vacuum. It is also a good example of how small publishing houses, rather than large commercial ventures, are prepared to challenge the demands of economic patronage as set out above in chapter II. It is clear that by entering the Western literary market at the beginning of the 1980s, el-Saadawi's work filled a vacuum in Western feminists' knowledge of their sisters in the Third World in general, and in the Arab world in particular.[198]

The assumption of the dominant role of feminism is strongly reflected in the views of two prominent translators of Arab literature. Catherine Cobham believes that the 1970s and 1980s constituted the heyday of feminism. She states that this broad context of

[198] On the development of feminist literature, Leila Ahmed writes: "With respect to women and the issue of women, the cultural productions and discourses from the 1950s to 1980s appear to fall into two distinct phases. The first phase was marked by a lively feminism, finding expression in organization activities and in literary forms that showed a critical consciousness of the politics of male domination in psychological and other realms not previously explored... By the 1960s and 1970s, in addition to continuing the battle to institute reform in the Personal Status Laws (the laws governing marriage), women now began to make visible the covert, unofficial aggressions and manipulations, both psychological and physical, to which they were subject and to address themselves to and organize around taboo issues, such as clitoridectomy" (Ahmed, 214) According to al-Ali, Ahmad classifies el-Saadawi within the second phase. However, I argue that el-Saadawi could be taken to be the representative of the Arab feminist, in both phases. She is both working on the institutional and more personal level.

intense feminist activity sheds light on el-Saadawi's prominence in the West in the 1980s, and explains her "comparatively big public readership in the West".[199] Tetz Rooke, one of Cobham's fellow translators of Arab literature, notes in private correspondence with the author that "el-Saadawi was commercially successful in the 80s and early 90s not because of brilliant reviews… but because of the then current strong interest in feminism and the growing debate about the condition of Arab women in Muslim society."[200]

This Western feminist thirst for knowledge of the Arab world is underlined in the introduction to an interview with el-Saadawi conducted by the feminist journal *Spare Rib,*[201] a woman's liberation magazine. *Spare Rib* conducted the interviews while el-Saadawi was in Britain participating in the first International Feminist Book Fair, prior to the publication of any of her works in English. In the introduction, the reviewer writes "Mona, Aicha, and Lina, from the Arab Women's Group spent two hours with her, rushing through a variety of subjects and questions that *quenched only some of our thirst.*"[202] The discussion included questions on the relevance of feminism to Third World women, how to address the issue of illiteracy amongst Third World women and

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[199] Personal correspondence, 23 April 2003.

[200] Personal correspondence, 20 July 2003. I would argue that this quote shows that at a time when western feminism was growing in popularity, a new debate was surfacing on the topic of the status of women within Muslim societies. I will be discussing the interaction between these two phenomena below when looking at how the Iranian Revolution affected western readers' horizon of expectation.

[201] *Spare Rib* later became a forum that presented el-Saadawi's works through publishing extracts from her work in a number of issues ("Women and Islam", *Spare Rib*, issue 90, January 1980p. 50-53 and "Clitoridectomy crime against women", *Spare Ribe*, issue 92, March 1980: 6-8). It also regularly printed interviews it held with her under titles such as "Time to come together", "Talking to an Egyptian Feminist" (interview with Jill Nicholls. *Spare Rib,* no. 78 (January 1979) and "Nawal Practicing Feminism" (interview with Tsehai. *Spare Rib,* no.169 (August 1986):14-17.

[202] *Spare Rib, d.n.* (author's emphasis).

the topic of female circumcision. These questions reflect Western feminists' enthusiasm in the 1980s for an interaction between Western and non-Western feminists, an enthusiasm that was later challenged by Third World feminists and a point to which I will return below.

3.4.2 Personal factors specific to el-Saadawi

A number of factors specific to el-Saadawi's personality and life help to explain Western feminist interest in her work. These are: her personality, public role as political activist and her status as an unapologetic Arab feminist, her background as medical doctor, and presence in the West.

First, when considering el-Saadawi's success, as compared to other authors, it is important to recognise her charisma. It is normal to hear of how audiences respond 'rapturously' to her appearances and speeches, even when she is merely delivering a paper at a "dreary, academic" conference.[203] Even her publisher at Zed books seems struck by what he calls the 'the sheer force of her personality' – in his words, she is 'remarkable', and 'brave'.[204] Such charisma is particularly important, as her publisher goes on to point out, in an "age of celebrity". Prominent figures get noticed. They are newsworthy. They become the subject of gossip and debate. In el-Saadawi's case the crucial point is that her charisma enables her to cross borders. As one commentator put

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[203] "More Notes from the Front" by Bob Holman http://poetry.about.com/library/weekly/aa021500a.htm
[204] Nawal El-Saadawi, interview by author, 10 May 2005.

it, "she crosses borders the way poets cross streets".[205] Whether the metaphor is apt or not, it has had an impact. Witness the combination of charisma and border-crossing noted by Beatrix Campbell, the writer and broadcaster, who met her in the mid 1980's at a rally in Hyde Park in support of the miners' strike. Campbell stated that "she's an amazing gift to the movement", adding: "She was a woman who in that period of British feminism was a remarkable presence. She was one of the first to initiate the engagement between black and white feminists."[206] Indeed, it is el-Saadawi's bold personality which should take the credit for her ability to capture all important "initial credibility". [207] El-Saadawi's strong personality and feminist hold was admired by British feminists and granted her a credible status that would later widen her reception, thus generating an interest in any work she produced. This explains for example *The Guardian's* acknowledgment of el-Saadawi as a uniquely powerful voice in the international women's movement. Since the early 1980s she has been treated as the unquestioned spokeswoman for all Arab women across unlimited time and space. On a more critical note, of course, it can give us a clue to understanding Edward Said's complaint that el-Saadawi is "over-exposed and over valued."[208]

What her supporters view as the brave nature of her criticism against her own government and other forces of power, such as militant Islamists, and her well-known

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[205] "More Notes from the Front" by Bob Holman http://poetry.about.com/library/weekly/aa021500a.htm
[206] Raekha Prasad. "Lone start of the Nile," *The Guardian*, June 17 2000.
[207] Edward S. Inch and Barbara Warnick, *Critical Thinking and Communication: the Use of Reason in Argument* (Allyn and Bacon, 1998), 76.
[208] This conclusion was altered in the course of commenting on the difficulties Said faces in promoting Arab literature with American publishers and the fact that there are a number of good writers who are worthy of being acknowledged. Edward Said, "Tragically, a closed book to the West," *The Independent on Sunday,* 12 August 1990.

status as a political and human rights activist, have reinforced the West's perception of the strength of her personality. El-Saadawi's activism and commitment to her feminist cause is what makes her writing significant for Western readers. Amal Rasam writes in a review of *The Hidden Face of Eve* that the work "can only be appreciated in the context of her ongoing commitment and contribution to the movement of liberation of both men and women in Arab society."[209] Amal Amireh writes that el-Saadawi "addresses readers with the confidence of a physician, the passion of an activist, the credibility of an eyewitness, and the pathos of an injured woman."[210]

Events in el-Saadawi's life have kept her in the limelight of the Western media.[211] The controversial impact of her challenging stand to the authorities in Egypt, be it political or patriarchal, is noted as significant in the introduction to an interview with her on the BBC's Front Row. The BBC presenter stated that "even in her 70's, el-Saadawi is still considered threatening" to the authority figures in her society. No doubt this powerful representation of el-Saadawi would deem her literary work to be of interest to those concerned with the fight against oppression. The interview highlights this aspect of her writing, as it notes "her novels are concerned with freedom and injustice".[212] I consider that such media exposure facilitates a reminder of el-Saadawi's works. This is not a new

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[209] Amal Rassam, "Unveiling Arab Women," *The Middle East Journal* 36, no. 4 (Autumn 1982): 383 – 587.

[210] Amireh, "Framing Nawal el Saadawi", 215.

[211] As a result of el-Saadwi's writing on feminist issues, she has received death threats from Islamic groups in Egypt. In addition, legal proceedings were issued against her for her views on Islamic inheritance law and other critical issues relating to women's' position under Islamic law. In 2001, a number of articles were written on the BBC website covering her trial for apostasy. For example, see *"Egyptian writer faces apostasy trial"*. BBC Radio 4, Tuesday, 24 April 2001.

[212] Ibid.

advantage as far as her work is concerned. *The Hidden Face of Eve* received its share of extra publicity when the arrest of el-Saadawi was reported in a feminist magazine, a year after the publication of the book. The arrest was reported in *Spare Rib* after the following introduction:

> Nawal el Saadawi, whose pioneering work on women's rights and female sexuality in relation to Islam we've publicized in *Spare Rib*, was among the 1535 people arrested in Egypt in the week of September 6. Nawal el Saadawi's excellent book *The Hidden Face of Eve* (excerpted in SP 90 92) is published by Zed Press.

It is clear that el-Saadawi's life struggle is one point that grants her work an element of grandeur.[213] It is also worth noting that reviewers never fail to highlight the political price she has paid for her open stand on the feminist issues, and to emphasis that her novels are the accumulation of this struggle[214]. I will illustrate this below when looking at reactions to her books. To some reviewers, el-Saadawi's sturdiness is an overwhelming aspect to her personality that is clearly expressed. For example, reviewing *The Nawal el Saadawi Reader,* Zena Farel writes in *India Weekly* after meeting el-Saadawi:

> I have to admit to feeling some trepidation. This was the woman who had emerged unbowed and unrepentant after being stripped of her official

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[213] "She has a wonderful sense of mischief," observes Ann Jones, Esther Cloudman Dunn professor of Comparative Literature, who calls Saadawi a real feminist in theory and in practice, "I think she's one of those people whose oppression has the effect of making her stronger." [213] "She is one person who is very polemical in her thinking and writing," says Katwiwa Mule, an Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature whose classes have read and discussed Saadawi's work. "You think you know something, but she keeps engaging you on a higher plane."[213] "She Came, She Spoke Her Mind", April Simpson, Smith College News, Winter 2005
www.smith.edu/newssmith/winter 2005/saadawi.php

[213] ibid.

[214] For example, on the back cover of *A Daughter of Isis,* Doris Lessing writes that "the author fought injustice all her life, succeeded in becoming a doctor…then a writer." El-Saadawi, 1980

> posts and imprisoned by the Sadat regime, who had unceasingly fought for Egyptian women's social and intellectual freedom, campaigning against all forms of circumcision whether male or female.[215]

Second, many reactions to her work show that Western feminism attached a great deal of credibility to el-Saadawi's insights into the nature of Egyptian women's lives, on the basis of her professional experience as a medical doctor. The reason for such interest is set out succinctly by Al-Hassan Golley, who in relation to el-Saadawi's profession has concluded that "it is interesting to note that medicine, in its liberal and symbolic power, was the absolute heart of the Western feminist battle in the education sphere."[216]

I consider that el-Sadaawi's medical background is a crucial aspect in explaining her success in the West. Given the topics on which she comments, namely those often associated with the physical and mental well-being of women, her credibility as a commentator is greatly increased in the eyes of her Western critics by her professional training and experience. It is not uncommon for feminist academics to cite el-Saadawi's direct involvement in the medical and psychiatric spheres as being a significant contributor to her analysis in her examination of the oppression of Arab women. Golley goes as far as to argue that el-Saadawi's "medical knowledge" and "firsthand experience" indeed validate "her research in this discourse.[217] Furthermore, Multi-Douglas explains that el-Saadawi is able to apply this experience in developing a twofold exposition of the "sexual politics of medicine", acting as both "a vehicle for

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[215] Zena Farel, "Passion, Politics and the World of Saadawi," review of *Nawal el-Saadawi Reader, by Nawal el-Saadawi,* Indiaweedly (14 -20 November 1997): 25.
[216] Al-Hassan Golley, 138.
[217] Ibid., 132.

women to regain their lost power" whilst also being "the focus of her own call for the integration of traditionally male and female qualities".[218]

With reference to the protagonist in *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*, Malti-Douglas shows that el-Saadawi views medicine not only as a means of obtaining first-hand experience of Arab women's suffering, but also as a means of deconstructing the society's firmly-established belief that femininity and masculinity are genetically pre-determined forms of life. Through deconstructing the human body in the anatomy class, the protagonist in that novel comes face-to-face with the reality that all humans, whether male or female, are simply made up of a body. This lead to the realisation that the meaning of, and the role assigned to their feminine and masculine being is constructed and dictated by society. She thereby deconstructs the meanings of "femininity" and "masculinity", as imposed by society and as adhered to by women, usually without question:

> Why did my mother place these enormous differences between me and my brother, and make of man a deity for whom I had to spend all my life cooking food? Why is society always trying to persuade me that masculinity is a distinction and an honor, and femininity a disgrace and weakness? Is it possible for my mother to believe that I am standing with a naked man in front of me, and with a scalpel in my hand with which I will open his stomach and his head? Is it possible for society to believe that I am contemplating a man's body and dissecting it and cutting it up without feeling that it is a man? And who is society? [219]

In addition to feminist academics, reviewers of el-Saadawi's oeuvre focused on her medical background as an impetus in her research on the oppression of Arab

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[218] Multi-Douglas, 37.
[219] El-Saadawi, *Memoir of a Woman Doctor*, 24-25.

woman. According to one of them, it is the "trusted position" she enjoyed being a doctor that "allowed her to learn many intimate details about women's lives". [220] In order to be able to advocate against any male treatment of women in society, a feminist needs to unravel the core problems facing women, which is exactly what el-Saadawi was able to do. As one commentator puts it "as a doctor, she knows whereof she speaks when she discusses childbirth, abortion, and women's health."[221] Other reviewers go as far as to claim that "her writing and beliefs may not have had such power if she hadn't spent time in the clinics, witnessing how ordinary society operated." [222] This view is bluntly reinforced by Stephanie McMillan, who states:

> Much of what informs el-Saadawi's writing is her experience as a medical doctor and psychiatrist in Egypt. The trusted position allowed her to learn many intimate details about women's lives, and she was able to compile information that was usually hidden beneath the surface. [223]

In a review of *The Hidden Face of Eve*, Elizabeth W. Fernea of the University of Texas in Austen, writes "as a doctor, she knows whereof she speaks when she discusses childbirth, abortion, and women's health. As a woman, she cries out against the injustices she sees imposed upon women in the Arab countries, most specifically in Egypt, her home."[224] The preface to *The Hidden Face of Eve* refers to arguments present in both that book, as well as in a number of un-translated books of hers that she wrote as a medical researcher and feminist. On the back cover of the book we are promised that

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[220] Stephane McMillan. "Dissident from birth," *City Link* , October 13, 1999, 76.
[221] Elizabeth W. Fernea , MESA Bulletin (Dec 1983): 139.
[222] Slee, "Egypt's dissident daughter", 52.
[223] McMillan, 76.
[224] Elizabeth W. Fernea , MESA Bulletin, 193.

we will read the work of "an Egyptian doctor of medicine, a novelist and a militant writer on Arab women's problems and struggle for liberation."

The credibility granted to her due to her profession is not limited to her discussion of women physical status, but also to their mental condition. With regard to el-Saadawi's comments on the subject of the veil, Grace writes that "trained as a medical doctor, el Saadawi documents the mental problems of her veiled patients, victims of the 'oppression' and 'contradictions' of the veil in Egypt today."[225] Indeed, later in her career, el-Saadawi wrote that her "interest in psychiatry and mental health was a direct result of [her] experience gained as a woman observing and treating other women in rural and urban areas".[226]

El-Saadawi herself is well aware of the literary advantages of being an Arab female physician and asserts that being a woman and a medical doctor has made her able to obtain confessions impossible for a man to obtain. Like radical Western feminists, she argues that in stark contrast to men attempting to understand women's reality, only women interacting on a daily basis with other women gain a genuine insight into each others' experience, and she stresses the medical nature of her interaction with those women of whom she writes:

> My knowledge of the medical sciences, my work in rural areas, my relations with male and female patients, fed my writings with a deep and

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[225] Grace, 16.
[226] El-Saadawi, *The Nawal el Saadawi Reader*, 53.

> rich experience, and with human and artistic material characterized by its reflection of the reality I was living and the wealth of details related to it.[227]

In her argument for the need to place the issue of female circumcision in its historical and political context, rather than separate these issues, which she sees as a somewhat sensationalised and simplistic Western feminist view, el-Saadawi has specifically invoked her experience as a doctor, saying that she "started from the personal experiences of [her] patients to sustain a credible stand of someone who knows what they are talking about in her argument".[228]

In summary, those reviewing and critically appraising el-Saadawi's writing, attach considerable importance to the influence of her work as a doctor.

Third, in addition to the sheer force of her personality, her work as an activist and as a doctor, el-Saadawi has been closely involved with the British feminist movement and has been present at major British feminist events, including Greenham Common in 1983[229] and the South London Women's Hospital siege in 1985.[230] Her participation in conferences, International Women Book Fairs and meetings in the West have lead to

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[227] 'Creative women in changing societies', UN Institute for Training and Research Seminary, Oslo, 9-13 July, 1980). www.worldcatlibraries.org/wcpa/ow/cca5efdeb997eb08.html

[228] Nawal el-Saadawi, "The Bitter Lot of Women: an interview with Nawal el-Saadawi by Hanny Lightfoot-Klein, *freedom Review* 25(3),1994.

[229] The women's peace camp that started in 1981 to protest against a nuclear airbase at Greenham Common in Berkshire that was chosen to hold the UK's 160 cruise missiles.

[230] A group of feminists took over The South London Women's Hospital in opposition to its planned closures and remained in the hospital for a number of months.

radio and television interviews,[231] which are undoubtedly a precondition for harnessing successful publicity.[232] With time these circles of exposure expanded to include reviews in national papers such as *The Guardian*, which has not only reviewed her work but has also advertised it. Her autobiography, *A Daughter of Isis,* was advertised at end of *The Guardian's* Saturday Profile'.[233]

Having set out background considerations surrounding the interaction between the two most dominant ideologies concerning the reception process of el-Saadawi, I will now turn to her major works in an attempt to analyse in more detail the extent to which those two ideologies played a role in the reception of the first two pieces of her work published in the West, and her work in general after her second major publication.

3.5 The reception of The Hidden Face of Eve[234]

The Hidden Face of Eve was published at a period of general international debate on violence against women that had developed since the mid 1970s. It is the book with which el-Saadawi achieved her breakthrough into the Western literary system (the

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[231] This was the case after the Feminist Brighton conference and following the New York University conference.

[232] The latest event which featured el-Saadawi as a major feminist figure was in the Spit-Lit Festival: Celebrating Women's Writing, in which el-Saadawi was the guest speaker at "The International Women's Day Lunch" (4-12 March 2005). During the same period, el-Saadawi was interviewed on Woman's' Hour on 8 March 2005 and recorded an interview with the BBC on 9 March 2005. The major topics on which el-Saadawi fielded questions were the reasons for her decision to put up her name up for the Egyptian elections, the topic of "Dissidence and Creativity" (the title of the subject she teaches at American and other western Universities) and finally the issue of female circumcision.

[233] "Raekha Prasad, "Lone star of the Nile", *The Guardian 17* June 2000, 6.

[234] Nawal el-Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World* El-Saadawi (Zed Books 1980) *al-Wajih al-'ārī Lil-mar'a al-'arabiya*. Bayrūt: al-Mū'ssasa al-'arabiya lil-dirāsāt wa-al-nashir, 1977.

Anglophone market) and which established her reputation in the West. The essence of my argument below is that the reception of this work cannot be reduced to a simple story of Orientalism. Although Orientalist themes are important, and appear repeatedly, ultimately it is more feminism - although of a selective nature - that explains the success of the work.

3.5.1 The Book Itself

The Hidden Face of Eve is a non-fiction work that was first published in Arabic in 1977. It was translated and published in English in 1980, only a year after the Iranian revolution. This was el-Saadawi's first full work to reach an English audience and remains her most successful non-fictional work. The book is still widely seen to be her most important work, now almost synonymous with her name. In 2005 it was still present on academic reading lists, especially in the US, and according to its publisher, Zed Books, it has sold 80,000 copies to-date, a substantial number for any translated work.

Compared with previous Arab writing, *The Hidden Face of Eve* deals in an unprecedented manner with issues such as women's sexuality within Islam, with a particular emphasis on the views of the Prophet and his wording on the matter, the question of marriage, sex, virginity, clitoridectomy, and other practices related to the life and reality of women. She also takes a historical step back and contextualises individual feminist issues within a broader framework of analysis. As with most of her work, she

looks at the important and positive role some women have played in the Arab world throughout history, ranging from those in the patriarchal tribal systems of the pre-Islamic Arab world, through to those who played a pioneering role in the women's liberation movement in Egypt in the 1950s. She uses this analysis to attack the limitations, created by the patriarchal nature of Egyptian society, which are imposed upon women's opportunities in contemporary society. For many in the West however, her book carried particular importance because of its analysis of the practice of circumcision in Egypt.

3.5.2 Orientalist discourse in the reception of *The Hidden Face of Eve*

As set out in chapter II, political events can have a significant impact on the reception of literature into a literary system. Throughout history, Orientalist discourse has taken advantage of this process. For example, Said's work refers to Napoleon's use of Orientalism to portray his military campaign in Egypt as a civilising force.[235] Thus an intense political event was explained and justified through the use of Orientalism. Similarly, today the focus on aspects of Islam that can be portrayed in a purely 'negative' way from a Western perspective (such as the role of the veil) appears to me to be a clear example of Orientalism forming cultural propaganda 'against' Arab states in the 'war on terror'.

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[235] Said, 85-86.

El-Saadawi's breakthrough with *The Hidden Face of Eve* occurred in 1980, one year after the Islamic Revolution in Iran. As noted, the book deals with issues such as female circumcision and other aspects of female violation, in addition to a number of other themes, specific to the Arab world. These are themes that would clearly have lent themselves to Orientalist discourse seeking to reinforce conclusions it was drawing at the time about the Islamic world, on the basis of the Iranian Revolution.

As Amireh argues, "historically, the West's interest in Arab women is part of its interest in and hostility to Islam".[236] She argues that this interest is furthermore grounded in "the colonialist project which casts women as victims to be rescued from Muslim male violence", and can certainly be linked to the rise in anti-Islamic discourse following the 1979 Iranian Revolution against the pro-U.S Shah.[237] Although no detailed research has been carried out on this issue, Amireh refers to the Iranian Revolution and the subsequent revival of Western hostility towards Islam in the 1980's as one of the major factors in el-Saadawi's success in penetrating the Western markets. This interpretation is reflected to some extent in Rook's comment on el-Saadawi's success (referred to above when looking at the feminist knowledge vacuum), where he notes that her success is the result of both feminism and the debate on the situation of Muslim women in particular.

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[236] Amireh, "Framing Nawal el Saadawi", 221.
[237] Ibid., 221.

The revolution was undoubtedly followed by a new interest in the lives of Iranian women, a substantial number of papers and conferences dealt with the issue. [238] With regard to the Western media's exaggerated "campaign" in 1979 and the immediate period following the Revolution, Skye Lavin reflects:

> An enthusiastic campaign was launched in defence of Iranian women condemned to the dark walls of the chador. Iran overnight became peopled by hundreds of thousands of women, impressive yet chilling as they stood clothed in their long black robes, while the incessant click of Western cameras carried this medieval sight to millions of readers all over the world.[239]

El-Saadawi herself expressed her concern over the Western media's coverage of the Iranian Revolution. In 1981 she noted that Khomeini's regime was using Islam to veil men as well as women:

> It's a matter of who benefits from the veil, who benefits from the most negative parts of Islam. Who is blowing up the most reactionary parts of Islam, even in the Iranian revolution? It's the mass media in the West. [240]

By referring to the Iranian Revolution as a factor influencing the use of Orientalist discourse in relation to el-Saadawi's work, I do not seek to argue that the Revolution forced Westerners to see her work in an Orientalist light. I also think that without the

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[238] The immediate interest in Iranian women's lives following the revolution is evident in a number of papers and conferences that dealt with the issue. For example, Mary Elaine Hegland's paper entitled "'Traditional' Iranian Women: How They Cope" in *The Middle East Journal*, Autumn 1982, volume 36, No. 4). Anne H. Betteridge, "Muslim Women and Shrines in Shiraz," paper prepared for the Symposium on Islam: Spiritual Foundations and Modern Manifestations, Brigham Young University, October 22 and 23, 1981; Lois Beck, "Women in Revolutionary Iran," paper presented at the conference Women in Islam, Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies, Copenhagen, Denmark, November 1979, p. 12.Finally, in the media, *Spare Rib*, "Women and the uprising in Iran", no. 79 February 1979:41-43., "The Crime of Being A Woman in Iran." *Spare Rib, issue 126, January 1983: 37-39.* And "Iran – The Revolution that affected all women in the Moslem world," *Spare Rib*, issue 128, March 1983: 20-22.

[239] Skye Lavin, "Dissidence and Creativity, Wholeness and Censorship: A Conversation with Egyptian Feminist Nawal El Saadawi," *Sojourner: The Women's forum* 25, no. 3 (January 2000): 1-2.

[240] "Iran – The Revolution that affected all women in the Moslem world." *Spare Rib*, issue 128, March 1983: 20.

revolution, the Orientalist reaction to her work would still have been considerable. The key point is that the Revolution resurrected a pre-existing hostile Western attitude to the Islamic world, which was brought to the forefront of a Western social discourse in which the oppression of the Muslim woman is related inextricably to role of Islam. In my view, this resurrection contributed to the creation of a general interest in el-Saadawi's writing and it is likely that it intensified the use of Orientalist discourse in relation to the reception of her work. If this is correct, the role played by the Iranian Revolution is a powerful example of Severe's notion of a readership's socio-cultural horizon consisting of political, ideological and other cultural forces, as set out in chapter II.

A summary of the Orientalist nature of some reviewers' reception of the book can be broken down into four categories: representations of Islam as a religion inherently hostile to women (3.5.2.3), accusations of el-Saadawi failing to condemn Islam as an inherently oppressive religion (3.5.2.4), use of Orientalist language and analysis (3.5.2.5) and representation of el-Saadawi's characters as models for understanding Arab women (3.4.2.6).

3.5.2.3 Examples of reactions to *The Hidden Face of Eve* concluding the book represents Islam as a religion inherently hostile to women

Some of el-Saadawi's critics have concluded that in referring to Islam as one of many elements underpinning the oppression of Arab women, *The Hidden Face of Eve* provides

confirmation for those seeking to confirm their view of Islam's inherent hostility towards women with first-hand confirmation of their belief.

It is clear that el-Saadawi was aware of the risk of this happening, even before her first book had been published in the West. Amireh has noted that el-Saadawi deals with the potential Western oversimplification of her views on the role played by Islam in the oppression of Arab women.[241] El-Saadawi dedicated a substantial space in her Preface to Zed Books' publication of the book, to argue that the oppression of Arab women is not simply a result of the Islamic culture in which they live, but a result of a long history of female oppression present in all religions and all cultures. In making this argument in her Preface, el-Saadawi is anticipating selectivity within the receptive literary environment in terms of how she will be interpreted. Therefore, as Amireh argues she attempts to have some control over the reception of her work, although ultimately this is overtaken to a certain extent by reviewers and market forces with their own agendas.[242]

The first notable example, which demonstrates how the complexity of el-Sadaawi's analysis of Islam's role has been reduced through its reception in the West, can be found not in one of the categories of expertise (reviewers, academics), but rather in a category of patron, namely the publishing company itself. As noted above, the American publisher of the novel chose to omit the preface published by Zed Books. I would argue that one of the reasons for this decision is likely to be the US publisher's negative,

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[241] Amireh, "Framing Nawal el Saadawi", 222.
[242] Ibid., 222.

market-driven response to el-Saadawi's nuanced analysis in relation to the nature of Islam. It also serves a powerful example of Lefevere's insight, as quoted above in full, that popular beliefs and conceptions can act "as a constraint" on a patron when it makes a "choice …of both form and subject matter".[243] Notably, the publisher has opted to provide a forward to the book by Irene L.Gendzier.[244] Providing such a forward by an American academic is, understandably an attempt to provide credibility for a new author amongst its readers.

El-Saadawi's has made her view of her American publisher's (Beacon Press) decision not to print the Preface (published in Zed Book's edition of the work published in the UK) very clear:

> [Concerning] Beacon Press in Boston… I gave [them] my book – the preface, introduction, everything. Beacon Press cut it without my permission, making me feel that I have been exploited and my ideas distorted. Without the preface, it appears that I am separating the sexual from the political, which I never do. To me, women who think they are liberated but who are obsessed with sexuality are not liberated. They are living a new slavery. They are obsessed by not having men around just as they were obsessed with having them around. It is the other side of the same coin.[245]

Despite el-Saadawi's clear warning in her Preface not to 'Orientalise' or simplify the book, some reviewers and academics appear to have chosen to ignore the complexity of her thinking and have instead focused only on Islam. They fail to take into account el-Saadawi's analysis of Islam as a religion, like any other, that can be interpreted in a way

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[243] *op. cit section 2.4.2.1*
[244] Irene L.Gendzier is a professor in the Department of Political Science at Boston.
[245] Patterson and Gillam, *190.*

that serves patriarchal aims. These categories of expertise fall squarely within Lefevere's analysis as they appear to be bearing the Western reader's horizon of expectation in mind in order to increase the appeal of her work. In Amireh's terms, they portray, at least to some extent, her "voice and image … in a way that fits First World agendas and assumptions."[246]

In relation to both el-Saadawi's first and second works, *The Hidden Face of Eve and Women at Point Zero,* both feminist and non-feminist reviewers use these books to reinforce the readers pre-existing beliefs that Islam is the crucial factor in explaining the oppression of Arab women. By ascribing this oppression to the specific nature of Islam, they separate the Arab women's situation from the otherwise universal nature of female oppression. In this sense the literary encounter with the Arab women is turned into part of the larger Orientalist voyeuristic encounter.

The introductory note to el-Saadawi's *Memoirs from the Women's Prison,* describes *The Hidden Face of Eve* as "the classic work on women in Islam".[247] By specifying the work to be an introduction to women in Islam, rather than to women in the Arab world and Islam, this summary ignores the political, economic, traditional and patriarchal factors highlighted by el-Saadawi in her analysis as all playing a large role in the oppression of

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[246] Amireh and Majaj, 49.
[247] El-Saadawi, 1986.

Arab women. The result is that the introduction implies that Islam is the sole factor behind the oppression.[248]

Another example that ascribes the oppression of Arab women in totality to the Islamic Arab nature of their society can be found in Amal Rassam's review of *The Hidden Face of Eve,* presented under the title "Unveiling Arab women".[249] The work is discussed alongside a number of other works that, according to Rassam, provide an important insight into the "sexual asymmetry in the Arab world". Rassam argues that although all societies recognise that there is a difference between the assumed roles of men and women, this gender division in the Arab world is taken to an extreme, for the role of women is limited to the domestic sphere and this state of affairs is largely dependent on the Islamic nature of the society:

> Within the context of the Arab-Muslim world, with its patriarchal culture and Islamic ideology, sexual asymmetry assumes an extreme form expressed in the segregation of women, their veiling and their relegation to the private domain of the household.[250]

Rassam goes on to state that Islamic ideology has developed a systematic view of women's sexuality and of their "proper" place in society, as interpreted by men of religion:

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[248] Saadawi, *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*, 1986, The Women's Press. In fact the German translation of the work embodies this generalisation whole heartedly and translates the title "Das Shadour… *Frauen im Islam*" – "Women in Islam". *Nawal El Saadaw, Tschador : Frauen Im Islam /.* Trans. von Suleman Taufiq von Edgar (Bremen: Peinelt, 1980).
[249] Rassam, "Unveiling Arab Women", 583.
[250] Ibid.

> The Quran, the Hadith and the various commentaries assign women a status that is inferior to that of men even though their roles may be complementary. The status ascribed to the woman translates itself into normative and legal prescriptions that limit their autonomy and deny them equality with men.[251]

In the same vein, Rashid writes in *Veiwpoint* that "of course, for a person born in a suffocated religious milieu, where from the age of six girls are degraded with the custom of circumcision for supposedly repressing sexual urges, it is not easy to overcome religious myths."[252] Again it is Islam and the extent to which it is engraved in the social mind that is implicitly singled out as the sole reason for the existence of the practice of circumcision.

This viewpoint of the (Islamic) root cause of the practice of circumcision is not limited to reviewers, but also includes academics. As part of her debate on feminist universalism and particularism, Lionnet refers to the practice of circumcision as one of the inflammatory points in this debate. However, before she goes into the debate itself, she categorises the phenomenon as part of the Middle-Eastern and Islamic culture, referring to "the phenomenon of female excision and infibulations, which is performed in parts of Africa and the Middle East, and which constitutes an important aspect of the cultural identity of Islamic women."[253]

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[251] Ibid.
[252] *Viewpoint* (January 22, 1987): 30.
[253] Francoise Lionnet, "Dissymetry Embodied: Feminism, Universalism, and the Practice of Excision," in *Borderwork: Feminist Engagements with Comparative Literature,* ed .*Margaret R. Higonnet. (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press,* 1994), 21.

As el-Saadawi stated many years later, the consequence of this process of relating the oppression of Arab women to only a single (religious) factor, is both a failure to recognise the political and economic nature of oppression as well as an encouragement to Westerners to view Arab women's oppression as different to their own experience, thus enhancing the Orientalist notion of "the other":

> The Orient or the South, or Africa have served long enough as sources of self-definition to the West or the North. This process has been going on for over four centuries. The mechanism used has remained the same; taking the societies, the ways of life, in Africa and elsewhere in the South out of their socioeconomic and historical context so that they appear unreal, strange, foreign; distancing them as much as you can.[254]

3.5.2.4 Examples of reactions to *The Hidden Face of Eve* which critice el-Saadawi's failure to condemn Islam as an inherently oppressive religion

Not only do some reviewers assume that Islam is the sole important causal factor in circumcision, but others even go on the offensive when they divine that Islam is being ignored. Some feminist reviews of *The Hidden Face of Eve* are clear-cut and unambiguous in the way they accuse Arab female writers, including el-Saadawi, of failing to diagnose Islam as the specific principal cause of Arab women's suffering. As a result, el-Saadawi's positive references to Islam are interpreted as being an act of defensiveness and a reflection of the failure to separate the emotional from the pragmatic.

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[254] El-Saadawi, *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader*, 130.

El-Saadawi does condemn Islam for the role it plays in Arab women's oppression, but stresses that this is only one example of the way in which a religion interacts with other factors within a patriarchal society.[255] For a number of reviewers, this is not enough. El-Saadawi's commitment to Islamic values leads a number of Western feminists to accuse her of "nationalist defensiveness that ultimately minimises the injustices of Arab society [and of] nationalist justification and defensive reactions designed to prettify reality for the benefit of critical foreigners".[256] Joel Beinin looks at how el-Saadawi deals with the topic of the Iranian Revolution in the Preface to *The Hidden Face of Eve*, where el-Saadawi has suggested that Islam can play an empowering role for women.[257] The key point is that Beinin misinterprets el-Saadawi's Preface, for he suggests that el-Saadawi is writing in a way that is tantamount to making "apologetic comments about the Iranian mullahs' oppression of women."[258] Arab feminist writers who do not condemn Islam whole-heartedly are seen by such critics as "emotional" or "pawns" to Arab men. Commenting on the implication of American feminist discourse, Marnia Lazege argues

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[255] *The Nawal El-Saadawi Reader*, quotes from her work in which she elaborates on the importance of women in history at length and argues that "women composed poetry and participated actively in the cultural, political and economic life of their tribal society before and after the advent of Islam". El-Saadawi, *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader*, 141.

[256] *Amireh, "Framing Nawal el Saadawi", 222.* El-Saadawi has noted that the difficulty western feminists have in appreciating the dual role played by nationalism and feminism in Arab women's struggle for emancipation is caused by their different historical background and experience. In replying to an interviewer's comment "your work has sometimes been described as a 'nationalist justification and defensive reaction designed to beautify reality for the benefit of critical foreigners", she replied: "this problem of nationalism and feminism is not well understood by Western people here. In Egypt and the Arab World we look to feminism in a different way than you do here because our problems are different. We are very politically minded, because our countries were exploited as colonies and are now exploited as new colonies. Because we're suffering from this, we cannot separate between our liberation as women, and national liberation." Nawal el-Saadawi, "Woman on the edge of time", interview with Deborah Pugh, *City Limits*, (13-19 July 1984): 14.

[257] Joel Beinin, *Middle East Report*, July August 1988, p. 47.

[258] As we have already seen above, this is misplaced because it is clear in the Preface that el-Saadawi clearly distinguished between the potential of Islam to play a positive role for women and the fact that in practice this potential is not realised.

that "an Arab woman cannot be a feminist prior to disassociating herself from Arab men and the culture that supports them".[259]

An example of "the emotional" accusation can be found in the comments of Elizabeth M. Fernea, an academic from the university of Texas. Whilst celebrating el-Saadawi's work, particularly with reference to el-Saadawi's credible views as a doctor experienced in childbirth and abortion, Fernea places some reservations on what she sees as the contradictions in el-Saadawi's view of the interrelation between Islam and women's oppression, as set out in *The Hidden Face of Eve*. For her, el-Saadawi refuses to link the state of oppression to Islam, a stand that leads her to consider that el-Saadawi's activism is "rather a cry from the heart" and "should not be judged as a work of critical analysis or as the development of a feminist theory".[260] Fernea's contradictory attitude to el-Saadawi is a stark example of how Orientalist themes pervade, even within ostensibly feminist discourses. El-Saadawi's testimony on the physical violation of women is accepted because she is a doctor and can participate in the programme established for curing the plight of the Arab woman. However, el-Saadawi's critical analysis of the relation between politics, economics and religion, and the violation of women is not even sound enough for Fernea to be included into the analysis of the feminist theory. Fernea's position with respect to el-Saadawi, who is seen as failing to stand as a valid feminist thinker despite her committed radical feminism, begs the question then of

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[259] Marina Lazreg, "Feminism and Difference: The Perils of Writing as a Woman on Women in Algeria," in *Conflicts in Feminims*. Evelyn Fox Keller and Marianne Hirsh, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1990), 326-248.
[260] Elizabeth W. Fernea , MESA Bulletin, 193.

which Third World woman can be authorized to speak. Characterising el-Saadawi as an emotional figure, and characterising her analysis as "a cry from the heart" is placing her back in the Orientalist framework of the emotional, passionate, Eastern figure, devoid of any possible logical or critical analysis or insights. Even among committed feminists, then, Orientalism rears it head.[261]

It seems to me that in some respects the pre-conceived ideas of Western feminists often dominate forms of reception, and drown out the voices of Arab feminist analysis. The fact that in Western eyes the Arab female feminist role should be limited to commentary on women's health issues is the height of a Western Orientalist superior attitude. As noted above, el-Saadawi explicitly addressed this issue in her Preface to the book but it appears that for some reviewers she was not explicit enough. This decision not to nuance their analysis by stating that Islam is not inherently oppressive, and not to repeat el-Sadaaawi's stress that religion per se can play an oppressive role, is a strong example of re-writers' reactions to a text being influenced by the dominant ideological discourse of Orientalism.

[261] Salman 1981,122. In another example, Amireh quotes Magda Salman, a reviewer for the leftwing magazine *Khamsin,* as saying that el-Saadawi is "an Arab feminist who has fallen into the deep trap of nationalist justification and defensive reactions designed to prettify reality for the benefit of 'critical' foreigners', and that she has "failed to go an inch beyond the Arab-Muslim nationalism of the Nasserites, Ba'thists, and their ilk." Amireh, "Framing Nawal el Saadawi", 222.

3.5.2.5 Use of Orientalist language

The third category of Orientalist reactions to *The Hidden Face of Eve* refers to the way in which some of those reactions use explicit Orientalist imagery. Titles of reviews of the book, such as "Unveiling Arab Women"[262] and "Woman - the slave of slaves", [263] frequently make reference to the mysterious and hidden face of the Arab world. The use of the word 'veil' in the titles is a marker of the stereotypical link between Arab women's oppression and Islam which is most emotively represented through the image of the veil. Grace argues that since the 1970s, "the veil has been adopted as a universal feminist cause, and associated, misleadingly, with the 'Islamic' practices of polygamy and female genital mutilation":

> It is as if the figure of 'veiled' Islamic woman herself has pulled a veil across the eyes of Western feminists and journalists, so that they have been unable to perceive anything in Islamic culture beyond or beneath the veil.[264]

Leila Ahmed has argued that the Western view of Islam holds that "Islam centred on women, that Islam was innately and immutably oppressive to women, and that the veil and segregation epitomized that oppression",[265] and Daphne Grace writes that "the veil is central to the discourse of West versus East, democracy versus 'fundamental' Islam, and still remains an icon of the otherness of Islam and a symbol of Muslim women's oppression."[266] In light of the tendency by some reviewers to focus entirely on the topic of the veil or other emotive themes, any piece of writing by an Arab author that

[262] "Unveiling Arab Women", *The Middle East Journal* 36, no. 4, (Autumn 1982).
[263] "Woman - the slave of slaves", *Viewpoint*, 22 January 1987.
[264] Grace, 101.
[265] Ahmad, 151 -152.
[266] Grace, 12.

condemns the condition in which Arab women find themselves, and which thereby deals with emotive themes such as the veil, will naturally attract critics, including some feminists,[267] whose analysis of female social oppression in the Arab World is influenced by Orientalism.

In order to demonstrate such use of language in relation to *The Hidden Face of Eve*, Barbara Rogers writes, under the title "Behind the veil", that the three books she is reviewing focus on the problems of women within "enclosed societies - or more precisely, societies which justify the containment of their women on religious or quasi-religious grounds." She singles out *The Hidden Face of Eve* as being the most significant of the three as its author "writes as an insider: a member, as well as a victim, of the society she indicts." Three Orientalist aspects can be identified in the title to her review and in the above illustration: the image of a woman wearing the *burqa*, the hidden, the exotic and the veil, the use of the word "victim" to describe the author, and the emphasis on the author being an insider providing, as Rogers states, "greater authenticity coming from the view from within".[268]

Some reviewers use the notion of women veiling themselves as the symbol of the degraded status of the Arab Muslim woman within the text of the review, without

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[267] Grace provides the example of two Arab feminists, Rana Kabani of Fatima Mernissi, being interviewed by an American feminist interviewer who later misreported the interview by writing an article that was entirely negative of Islam. Grace reports that Kabani "recalls a female American journalist who interviewed both herself and four others, yet her article in Vanity Fair 'was a catalogue of horrors about Islam... illustrated with a huge blow-up photograph of ghost-like women, veiled from head to foot. It ignored any of the important debates within Islam about the rights of women'". *Kabani, ix.*

[268] *Ibid.*

drawing attention to the fact in the title of the review. In a review of *The Hidden Face of Eve,* Rashid writes that "woman was veiled, as a mark of 'private property' of the wife owner or woman-owner, in the same way as a horse or cow was marked and housed in a stable".[269] Although debates over the topic of the veil is valued, the reviewer's imagery feels exaggerated.

El-Saadawi discusses this tendency of focusing unduly on the topic of the veil to reach general conclusions about Islam's role in oppressing women, and compares the veil to make-up worn by Western women. Nusrat Shaheen concludes that "in drawing this analogy, [el-Saadawi] emphasizes an often absent strand in white and secular feminist theories which perceive Muslim women as more oppressed than non-Muslim women particularly in relation to the veiling issue."[270] In other words, el-Saadawi asks what the difference is between the forces that lead women to wearing make-up and those that lead women to wear a veil. With this question she highlights the emotive nature of focusing on the issue when reviewing her work.

For Amireh, the use of Orientalist discourse can be found in places other than reviews. For her, it is evident that such considerations were also in the mind of the translator of *The Hidden Face of Eve.* She argues that the use of the word "hidden" can easily be interpreted as a way of creating a promise that the book will lead the reader into the

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[269] *Viewpoint*, 30.
[270] Nusrat Shaheen, *International Journals of Cultural Studies* (1997): 137.

exotic, hidden Arab world, in other words into the Oriental "other". She also argues that the use of the word "Eve" creates the image of a myth.[271]

3.5.2.6 Orientalist dimensions in Feminism

It is clear from the foregoing that Orientalism has played an important role in the reception of *The Hidden Face of Eve.* And as this section will show, even ostensibly feminist modes of reception are sometimes tainted by Orientalism, in that they are selective, focus on specific Orientalist themes abstract from historical, social and economic contexts in the non-West, and most importantly, retain a narrow, Eurocentric definition of feminism which is then elevated to a position of superiority, of having a mission vis-à-vis the non-Western female subject. These themes are well-exemplified by the proceedings of an important international conference, the UN Med-Decade of Women 'Conference on Circumcision', held in Copenhagen in July 1980, the same year in which *The Hidden Face of Eve* was published in English. El-Saadawi was a prominent speaker at the conference, and this was the first time that she reached a truly broad and international feminist audience,[272] a major step in, and a high-profile forum for, the discussion of what were considered by most to be universalist feminist issues.[273] In fact, such universalism was problematic: the conference is a fascinating source of insight into Western feminists' approach to the issues raised by their Third World

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[271] Amireh, "Framing Nawal el Saadawi", 226.

[272] El-Saadawi's recollection of the way in which issues were dealt with at the conference provide us with a fascinating insight of the Orientalist mindset held by western feminists in 1980 in relation to how to deal with their Third World colleagues. With that in mind, it was hardly surprising that the reception of her work was marked by Orientalism.

[273] Lionnet., 21.

colleagues. The conference reflected the continuation of the edgy relationship that had existed from the mid 1970s onwards between Western feminists and their Third World colleagues, as discussed in chapter II. On the causes of the divide at the conference, Catherine Mudime Akale has recently argued that African feminists present at the conference were denied the chance to voice their concerns, "own priorities and their own agenda advancing the cause of women", and had to follow the agenda set by Western feminists that focused mainly on circumcision and women's sexuality. She goes on to state:

> A capital strategic error had been made. African women's groups, including African feminists and African governments, had not been allowed to define for themselves their own priorities and their own agenda for advancing the cause of women. Instead they were having an agenda imposed on them from without by outsiders with very little understanding of the context of the real issues involved. This led to a polarisation and thus emerged the two camps of eradication activists and FGM custodians.[274]

Akale has also noted that the second bone of contention amongst Western and Third World feminists at the conference was in the fact that the "eradication activists" embarked on analysing and describing the problem of women's oppression in the Third World in isolation from other social, political, cultural and religions dynamics that also had influence on women's lives:

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[274] *"Who has the right to name female genital mutilation a crime?" Paper presented at Oxford Brookes University at "the Women's Worlds 7 the International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women", June 20-26 1999. Go to www.skk.uit.no/ww99/papers/Akale_Catherine _Mudime.pdf* With reference to the aspect of the above quote that refers western feminists' failure in 1980 to consider the possibility that Third World feminists had there own insights and done their own thinking on feminist issues, it is worth noting that some western feminists seemed to think that it was only in the early 1990s that Arab women were beginning to express anger at the situation they faced: Miriam Cooke praised *The Circling Song,* published in 1991, as "a powerful example of the kind of anger and desperation to which Arab women writers are beginning to give vent to". Miriam Cooke, a review of *The Circling Song, World Literature Today*: a Literary Quarterly of the University of Oklahoma 64 (Winter 1990): 187.

> In hijacking the findings of el Saadawi and others who had broken the culture of silence, and presenting these to the world as their discovery, the Western activists had failed to recognise the importance of indigenous input into the campaign.[275]

Akhale's viewpoint is shared by Alrawi who has made a very telling general denunciation of Western superior attitudes, warning that "by turning specific issues into an attack on a whole culture they [feminists] weaken and damage the effectiveness of the indigenous women's organisations and invite the charge of foreign meddling"[276] In many ways this reflects precisely the logic polarizing the issue and causing authors such as el-Saadawi to face criticism as inauthentic in the face of her own culture, rather than merely attacking particular social practices.

The difference of opinion between the two camps arose in relation to a number of specific issues, including circumcision.[277] El-Saadawi herself attended the conference where, together with colleagues of hers, she criticised the way in which Western feminists sensationalized the topic of female circumcision without looking at the broader

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[275] Ibid. www.skk.uit.no/ww99/papers/Akale_Catherine _Mudime.pdf

[276] Karim Alrawi, "Pride and Predjudice", *Afkar* 1, no.2. (July 1984): 72-73.

[277] Stehpanic Lundquist provides background information on the international mobilization against female circumcision. She writes that it was "at the 1975 UN Conference in Mexico City that western feminists first introduced their concerns in the international arena. There, western feminists were surprised to discover that the agenda items for the 'UN Decade for Women' did not reflect the interests of all the women present". Lundquist quotes Nijeholt, Swiebel and Bargas who have written that "it was a shock for American feminists to discover that they did not speak on behalf of all women, to be accused of imperialism and of dominating the conference". It is unclear, she concludes "whether or not the female circumcision debate was a central cause for this difference of opinion. However, the North-South divide was still evident in the way in which many of the issues were addressed at the *1980 UN Mid-Decade for Women* in Copenhagen, including the issue female circumcision." Stehpanic Lundquist, "Transnational Mobilization against Female Circumcision", *The Journal of Development and Social Transformation and Political Science* 1 (Nov 2004): 23-29.

context. [278] The criticism, in other words, was that her Western colleagues were approaching the topic with a limited and fixed agenda. Writing in 1980, she states:

> I am against female circumcision and other retrograde and cruel practices. I was the first Arab woman to denounce it publicly and to write about it in my book, *Women and Sex*. I linked it to other aspects of female oppression. But I disagree with those women in American and Europe who concentrate on issues such as female circumcision and depict them as proof of the unusual and barbaric oppression to which women are exposed only in African or Arabic countries. I oppose all attempts to deal with such problems in isolation, or to sever links with the general economic and social pressures to which women everywhere are exposed, and with the oppression which is the daily bread fed to the female sex in developed and developing countries, in both of which a patriarchal system still prevails.[279]

The selective and disproportionate focus of Western feminists on the issue of circumcision, as noted in el-Saadawi's comment, is a telling example of how their discourse and approach was laced with Orientalist concerns.

The key point is that by publishing a book dealing with this topic in the same year as the UN Conference on Circumcision in 1980, el-Saadawi walked into the open arms of Western feminists looking for Third World material on this topic. To pick one example, in her review of *The Hidden Face of Eve,* Elizabeth W. Fernea expresses her view that

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[278] On the relationship between Orientalism and an over-emphasis on circumcision, el-Saadawi comments on the approach Fran Hoskens, the American feminist authority on circumcision, takes in relation to the issue: "She was collecting information and I gave her information regarding the political and historical aspects, and she didn't use it. Intentionally, she wants to say in her work that clitoridectomy is Africa, it is related to certain people, it's barbaric because those people are barbaric, etc. She is not taking a scientific approach to the problem. She is considered an authority here [the US] perhaps because people want to discredit Africa. That's the way colonialism works. The colonial system wants to find justification to colonize and exploit Africa so they can say, 'how barbaric'! We must colonize them to modernize them." Patterson and Gilliam, 190.

[279] El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, XIV.

el-Saadawi's insight into the practice of circumcision in the book is the most valuable insight to be found in the text. Referring to the title of the chapter in which the topic is addressed, she concludes that "'The Mutilated Half, which deals with sexual aggression against women in Egypt, is the longest and strongest statement in the book."[280] It is hard to see this kind of response entirely outside a framework of Orientalist selectivity, because the book also deals with a number of other crucial issues such as domestic violence, which were not emphasised by cultural commentators. As Heschel explains:

> While el Saadawi addressed multiple issues related to third-world women, including education, health and economics it was FGM that the Western press singled out for special attention and which became in the Western women's movement the central concern about third-world women, and especially, Muslim women.[281]

Many years after the conference el-Saadawi was still voicing criticisms of the limitation and shallowness of Western feminists' analysis of the problems of Arab women. Although she does not use the term, it is clear that the essence of her criticism remains that Western feminists were and remain highly Orientalised in the way in which they dealt with the issue of Arab women's sexuality. In replying to Hanny Lightfoot-Klein who asked, 15 years after the conference, as to what should be done next in relation to

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[280] Elizabeth W. Fernea , MESA Bulletin, 193.

[281] Prof.Susannah Heschel, "Faith and Progressive Policy: Proud Past. Promising Future," International Human Rights and the Women's Movement. Presented at the Faith and Progressive Policy: Proud Past, Promising Future Conference, sponsored by the Centre for American Progress. (9 June 2004): 2-16 http://www.americanprogress.org. El-Sadaawi has commented openly on the selective nature of some reviewers approach to the topic of circumcision in her work in general: "...and here is a very subtle form of exploitation practiced, unfortunately, by feminists - so called progressive feminists. Gloria Steinem of Ms Magazine writes me a letter in Cairo and asks me for an article about clitoridetomy. So I write her an article setting forth the political, social and historical analysis, along with comments about my personal experience. She cuts the political, social and historical analysis and publishes only the personal statements, which put me in a very awkward position. People asked, how could Nawal write such a thing? She has such a global perspective on clitoridectomy, how could she write such a thing? They didn't know Steinem had cut the article." Patterson and Gillam, 190-91.

the topic of female circumcision, el-Saadawi shed light on Western feminists' shortcomings in understanding the entangled relationship between women's sexuality and other forms of political and economical oppression, saying that they should recognize the scope of the issue:

> Recognize its historical and political causes. Admit that women in our countries have been dealing with it for a long, long time. Instead of making a sensational fashion out of something that some Western feminists discovered yesterday and will forget tomorrow… female circumcision has been blown out of all proportion. It has been sensationalised in the West. But it's not the issue, it's part of many things. We are all circumcised women. And what happened to us? We became revolutionary. We enjoy sex, we have orgasms. It's not the issue. It is being isolated from its historical and political contexts. When you start a project to eliminate female circumcision they give you money. But when you link it to political and economic oppression they say 'no, no, we don't want any politics.' They want to limit it to sexuality. [282]

El-Saadawi is highlighting here the way in which she believes Western feminists contribute to the struggle against circumcision in way that involves a superior attitude *vis-à-vis* women from the underdeveloped world. She is saying that what Western feminists failed to acknowledge is that feminists in the underdeveloped world had already been working for some time on the issues of circumcision, in addition to other issues, without the help or input of their Western colleagues, which demonstrates that the sole fount of insight was not Western. She adds that Western feminists' focus on the sexual aspect of circumcision results in their failure to take on board the political and economic context of the practice of female circumcision.[283]

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[282] Hanny Lightfoot-Klein, "The Bitter Lot of Women", 22-4.
[283] Nnaemeka, 313.

In the larger sense, an Orientalist structure of knowledge can be perceived where the celebration of el-Saadawi turns out to make her far less than an equal participant to feminist knowledge, viewed by some of her critics as a kind of native informant. This is because the interaction with the West can no longer stand as an independent contribution, but becomes mere material for Western theoretical analysis that is related to Orientalism. For example a reviewer noting that "the greatest significance of Dr. el-Saadawi's work [*The Hidden Face of Eve*] lies perhaps in the overwhelming evidence she does provide from within the Arab world."[284] This reduces el-Saadawi to the status of an insider informing about the well known misfortunes of the Arab woman, rather than an activist critically and productively dealing with social issues relating to women's lives in the Arab world.

I would like to note that el-Saadawi, seems to encourage her Western readers to view her work as a representation of the Arab world whole, rather than strictly limited to Egypt. For example in the translation of *The Hidden Face of Eve*, we read that a number of women come to visit el-Saadawi's clinic some from Sudan and all over the Arab world, whereas in the Arabic version the reference is limited to her meeting Sudanese women with no reference whatsoever to Arab women. As noted by Golley: "The practice of female circumcision is alien to many Arab people, especially in Syria, yet Saadawi writes about it as if it were the norm in all Arab regions"[285] By including the phrase "The Arab world" one can argue that el-Saadawi herself is manipulating the issue of

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[284] Barbara Roger, *South*, d.n.
[285] Al-Hassan Golley, 179.

circumcision - the very accusation she points to her Western readers. In this instance it appears that el-Saadawi is manipulating a Western feminist interest in the Arab woman which she seems to be well aware of. Ironically, she thus appears to lend herself to Orientalist interpretation that she criticizes so vehemently.

3.5.3 Feminism

The importance of Orientalism in the reception of *The Hidden Face of Eve* should therefore be given its due. Readerships and audiences cannot be understood entirely outside this framework, and we have even seen how ostensibly feminist forms of reception are strewn with Orientalist pitfalls. However, contrary to the conventional ideas, my argument here is that a more genuinely, universalist feminist agenda in fact underpins a significant element in the reception of the book, especially as time passed and the pitfalls of Orientalism became more widely understood, and not least when as Said's intervention was disseminated and discussed in the social sciences and beyond.

On consideration of the circumstances surrounding the publication of the book, it is important to note that its selection and translation by Zed Books was not the product of a discernibly Orientalist attempt to understand Arab and Islamic culture, and the role of women therein, for a mass market used to colonial stereotypes. Rather, it is an example of a small, independent publishing house with a leftist-feminist agenda, taking the kind of risks with a text that larger publishing houses tend not to take, namely texts without an obvious mass appeal. Zed Books' aim, in keeping with their general orientation, was

to introduce to the general Anglophone reading public a book that provided a "intellectual distinction and originality; books that embody Third World and internationalist perspectives, interests and commitment; and books that relate to neglected issues of all kinds and to disadvanted social groups".[286] Moreover, in regard to the translation of the title, I would argue against Amireh, that the use of the word "Eve" is not mythical in nature, but rather a term that reflects the universal relevance of the experiences described in the book. The original Arabic title of the novel, is '*The naked face of the Arab woman*', specifically identifies the work with the experience of the Arab women. In contrast, the English translation, though promising in its subtitle "Women in the Arab World" to deal with the specific experience of the Arab woman, plays in the main part of the title on the universal connotations associated with Eve as the mother of female humanity. I would argue that the publisher and/or translator chose such a universality-orientated title in order to appeal to the universalist feminist readership of the early1980s. Indeed, following the publication of the book, el-Saadawi was embraced by feminists, and was reviewed by a substantial number of both feminist and main stream journals who celebrated the advent of an important feminist figure.[287] In many ways, the *Hidden Face of Eve* can be seen as a strong and typically feminist piece of writing. It not only looks in great detail at specific feminist issues, but also succeeds in contextualising el-Saadawi's analysis of these issues in a broader socio-economic and political context.

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[286] Http://zedbooks.co.uk/content.asp?pageid=aboutus

[287] The American version published by Beacon Press had an introduction by Irene L.Gendzier who notes that "Western feminists, for example, will find much of importance in its space." El-Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, vii.

El-Saadawi's own view of the book offers insight and further perspective on the broad intentions of her writing, against which it is possible to evaluate others' reception of the book. The themes in the book are as much secular-socialist in nature as they are commentaries on the way in which Islam is used in Egypt to impose patriarchal structures. In many interviews held with el-Sadaawi on the topic of the book, she repeatedly stresses the multi-faceted nature of the factors behind Arab women's oppression, as in fact expressed explicitly in her Preface to the English version. In the Preface she states that her commentary on Arab women's oppression must be contextualised within the socio-economic and political realities of the Arab world:

> The situation and problems of women in contemporary human society are born of developments in history that made one class rule over another, and men dominate over women. They are the product of class and sex.[288]

El-Saadawi also emphasises the fact that she perceives Islam to be a religion which, like Christianity and Judaism has been manipulated by a patriarchal society and which is not the direct reason for women's oppression.

Responding in part to el-Saadawi's concerns, feminism did not speak with one voice in response to *The Hidden Face of Eve*. Important figures explicitly rejected Orientalist forms of appropriation, especially over time. Professor Susannah Heschel, for example, criticised the disproportionate focus at the 1980 Conference on the practice of female

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[288] Ibid.

circumcision and noted its damaging effect. She agrees with el-Saadawi's comment that "the fascination with FGM in the West is sensationalist; it certainly fits the stereotypical Orientalist paradigm of Arabs and Muslim as sexually perverted and uniquely oppressive of women". Her position is that the motivation at the time of some feminists' engagement with Third World women's issues was questionable: "let us be on our guard" she notes, "that we are not drawn to human rights violations because they allow us to express a latent prejudice." [289] Interestingly, Heschel draws attention to how el-Saadawi herself strove to universalize issues that were being depicted by Western feminists in terms of narrow cultural particularism, by defining circumcision in a broader way, and enabling the discussion about it to articulate with larger feminist themes. As Heschel states:

> El Saadawi, whose fame in the West grew during the 1980s, was constantly asked about "female circumcision," to which she always replied that all women are circumcised, if not physically then "psychologically and educationally, pointing to the difficulties that Western women experience in achieving power, respect, success and simply having orgasms.[290]

Such commentary indicates that the sort of feminist issues that el-Saadawi was really trying to raise became a more salient part of her reception over time. For example, points which el-Saadawi had emphasized from the beginning, such as the links between socio-economic context and patriarchy, were increasingly recognised in reviews of *The Hidden Face of Eve.* El-Saadawi's emphasis of the fact that the basis of inequality is economic has clashed with a common feminist perception that one needs to pay particular attention to the role of sexuality in a society, for it is in

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[289] Heschel, http://www.americanprogress.org
[290] Ibid.

these norms that the divide according to gender manifests itself the most. This kind of commentary, clearly universalist in nature, is precisely the form of reception that el-Saadawi sought. We are now well beyond the frame of Arab or Islamic cultural particularism, and into a general interest in the way sexuality is linked to economic inequality, a structure transportable from New York City to Cairo.

Crucially, various feminists actually understood el-Saadawi's depiction of circumcision in a non-Orientalist way; others went as far as to say that her work had succeeded in 'de-Orientalising' the issue. There is no hint of exoticism or essentialism for example, in Hasna Lebbady's commentary on the importance of circumcision in *The Hidden Face of Eve*. Instead Lebbady places the discussion in the context of forms of physical violence to which women are subjected in society – whether in Europe or elsewhere.[291] Another reviewer commenting on the book writes that el-Saadawi has at least on paper 'de-Orientalised' the topic for Western feminists:

> Nawal el-Saadawi states, quite correctly, that Islamic, Arab or Eastern cultures are not exceptional in having transformed woman into a commodity or a slave… el-Saadawi's courage in exposing the different forms of oppression against women is to be applauded. And as a socialist, she has removed the examination of such practices as female circumcision from within an Oriental problematic to one which recognizes the social and historical character of such phenomena.[292]

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[291] Hasna Lebbady, Department of English, Mohammed V University, Rabat, Morocco. Towards a Transgressive Mode of Being: Gender, Postcoloniality and Orality. PostColonialismS / Political CorrectnessesS. Casablance 12-14 April 2001.

[292] Author unknown. *Women & Struggle*, summer 1984.

The reviewer usefully identifies that it is el-Saadawi's materialist analysis that enables her to 'de-Orientalise' discourse on topics related to sexuality and sensuality:

> While Orientalists were convinced of the uniqueness of Islamic and Arab traditionalism and have displayed a sometimes voyeuristic fascination with certain 'exotic' and 'barbaric' practices of the East, a materialist analysis does not ascribe autonomy to religions, cultural ideas and practices, but places them in a social context and links them to the level of development.[293]

Those who wish to shoehorn the reception of el-Saadawi into an exclusively Orientalist frame either have to define the latter discourse so vaguely as to evacuate it of all analytical substance, or they must ignore or pass over the important evidence indicating that more universalist-feminist themes were at play.

It would be foolish, moreover, to ignore the burgeoning of feminist discourse and practice from the 1970s onwards, which provided a vast reading market, the natural audience in some respects for *The Hidden Face of Eve,* and an audience, moreover, suffering with an identifiable knowledge vacuum which it sought to fill. Western feminism had long been interested in the topic of female circumcision and had in the 1970s led a programme of international pressure to put an end to the practice world-wide.[294] The feminist articles published on clitoridectomy in *Spare Rib* in 1979

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[293] Ibid.

[294] Until 1975, female circumcision was not recognised as an international human rights issue. It was not addressed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, nor did the two key International Human Rights Treaties on 1966 address the matter. In 1975, the *First World Conference on Women* took place in Mexico. According to the National Library of Medicine, in 1977 the Special Committee of non-governmental organizations on human rights of the UN in collaboration with WHO and UNICEF organized a sub-committee to investigate the status of women in 20 African countries and published a report. In 1979, the WHO held a conference in Sudan entitled 'The Traditional Practices Affecting the

constitute one such example.[295] What becomes apparent when looking at points raised by reviewers of her books and academics alike, including those covering its first appearance and those documenting the same piece of work ten years later, is the idea of el-Saadawi work being a long awaited contribution to a rising feminist knowledge.

A number of examples can give a flavour of how el-Saadawi's book was viewed as a way to fill gaps in knowledge and understanding. The basic idea was that the West lacked important information. Rosander has written extensively on el-Saadawi's *The Hidden Face of Eve,* and has noted that the work is highly appreciated and needed in the West. I understand Rosander's interest in el-Saadawi's contribution to the feminist knowledge as part of her concern over the lack of Third World perspective and the overtly dominant Western feminist endeavour. This view is reflected by the commentary of academic Elizabeth W. Fernea from the University of Texas, who writes that "thus its appearance, long overdue in English, provides an important document in women's history generally and in the history of women in the Middle East."[296] Furthermore, in the view of *New Women's Times Feminist Review* the work is described on the back cover of the book as "an excellent introduction for anyone who wants to understand the

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Health of Women and Children' whose outcomes were published in a report. In 1980, the WHO forbade the practice of female circumcision. In 1984, a Pan-African seminar was held in Dakar, Senegal, that established the Inter-African Committee Against Harmful Practices Affecting Women and Children (IAC) and in 1985 the UN Nairobi Conference on the Women's Decade passed Resolutions against FC. In 1988 the 39th Assembly of the WHO/Africa condemned FC_*Pub Med / National Library of Medicine* IPPF Med Bull. 1990 Apr; 24 (2):1-2 Ladjali M, Toubia N.

[295] Spare Rib published a number of articles concentrating on the need to combat the practice of female circumcision in coordination with third world feminists, for example Nawal el Saadawi, "Action on Clitoridectomty" interview by Jill Nicholls (82 May 1979) and "How Can We Support Our Sisters ? Editorial, 92, March 1980.

[296] Elizabeth W. Fernea , MESA Bulletin, 193.

position of Arab women in context of their society."[297] In this way, el-Saadawi's book was viewed as a pathway into the serious study of feminist issues. For example, Amal Rassam writes in *The Middle East Journal*:

> The genesis, evolution and perpetuation of patriarchy and the special forms of sexual asymmetry in the Arab world are important and challenging subject for serious study. This sampling of new books, varied as they are, constitutes a first step towards such a study, but we are still only at the threshold.[298]

Thus one can argue that el-Saadawi was embraced as a contributor to feminist knowledge. The depth of her feminist awareness is highlighted and gives substance to her work in the words of its reviewers. In this sense, feminism functions not only as a reception factor but also as a factor maintaining the presence of el-Saadawi. The fact that the work has been reprinted several times in the West indicates that Western interest in the Arab woman remains, and this continues to create a readership for el-Saadawi and other female authors.

To a large extent, el-Saadawi is celebrated by feminists for using the book to provide a historical and cultural background to other literary works dealing with the question of modern Third World women, and their struggle to accommodate themselves to traditional and religious constraints. For example, in an introduction to the work of Mariama Ba, winner of the Noman Award for publishing in Africa, Sasha Moorsom refers to *The Hidden Face of Eve* as a well-documented account of the struggle of Third World women against oppression, which can facilitate one's understanding of Mariama

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[297] El-Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve.*
[298] Rassam, "Unveiling Arab Women", 388.

Ba's novel *Serfdom for Women.*: "It is enlightening to read these two books side by side. Nawal el Saadawi has much to say about polygamy, the subject of Mariama Ba's novel."[299] Even those directly addressing the Iranian revolution do not necessarily fall into Orientalist discourse, but see el-Saadawi's work as facilitating understanding of Third World struggle, imperialism and the position of women. Obioma Nnaemeka celebrates the Preface to *The Hidden Face of Eve* (in the Zed Books edition) as "one of the best analyses of the Iranian revolution and of the relationship between imperialism and Islam, outlining its effect on women in the Arab world."[300] This may seem surprising, but it is certainly a finding supported by the evidence I have seen.

3.6 Women at Point Zero

Women at Point Zero[301] is generally considered to be el-Saadawi's major fiction success in the West. Its simple style is taken by many to be one of its greatest strengths. The main thrust of my assessment of the reception of this book in the Western literary system is that although some of the reaction to the book involved a distancing process between the reader/reviewer/critic and the themes contained in it (a process that betrays an Orientalist approach), on the whole the essence of its reception is one of feminism unaffected by Orientalist discourse. As one reviewer has put it, the book reflects el-Saadawi's key role as a writer who, with its publication in English, had begun "the long

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[299] Sasha Moorsom "*Serfdom for Women*", *New Society* 12 August 1982
[300] Nnaemeka, 304.
[301] El-Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero*, Trans. Sherif Hetata (London: Zed books, 1982)
.Imra 'ah'ind nugtat alsifr ; 1975

march towards a realistic and sympathetic portrayal of Arab women and Arab women writers: …challenging the myth that Arab women have nothing to say." [302] This is a notable shift when compared to much of the early reception of *The Hidden Face of Eve*. This may seem surprising, but it is certainly a finding supported by the evidence I have seen.

3.6.1 The book itself

Woman at Point Zero was first published in Arabic in 1975. It was translated by Sherif Hetata and published in English in 1983 by Zed Books, which as we have seen also published *The Hidden Face of Eve*. It is the most prominent of el-Saadawi's oeuvre, particularly for academic feminism and the ninth edition was published in 2001. According to *City Limits*, an urban affairs news magazine, *Woman at Point Zero* was the largest selling book in London for the week 20-26 January 1984.[303] The work was awarded the literary prize for Franco-Arab friendship. Readers of el-Saadawi's works that have been translated into English generally believe it to be her best novel. Ann Biersteker, Director of the Program in African Languages at Yale University has stated that it is "her most widely taught novel. Whenever I teach it, I find that every student has read it straight through."[304]

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[302] "Entry to private World", *Middle East Journal*, review of *Woman at Point Zero*, by Nawal el-Saadwi and *Distand view of Miaret, by* Alifa Rifat, *Middle East Journal* 23 (March 1984): 19.
[303] *City Limits*, quoted on the back –cover of *Woman at Point Zero*. Zed Books. London 1983.
[304] Ann Biersteker notes on the works of el-Saadawi. "Nawal el-Saadawi: Notes for further reading." http:poetry.about.com/library/weekly/aa021500b.htm

Women at Point Zero is related to el-Saadawi's research into women's health, and in particular the state of physical and mental health of female prisoners in Egypt. The protagonist's character, a prostitute, is based on an interview she conducted in 1973 with a prisoner who was awaiting execution for murdering her "self appointed" pimp.[305] The book describes the struggles of Firdaus, the protagonist, suffering as she does under society's materialistic and hypocritical shortcomings.

The novel was banned in some Muslim countries, on the basis that commentators in the Arab world saw the novel as an invitation to admire the sexual liberation of Firdaus' character. However, one can argue that what el-Saadawi wants us to admire is that Firdaus tried until her very last breath to fight social hypocrisy to the point of paying the ultimate price, namely death. In my mind, el-Saadawi showed tremendous courage in addressing the thorny issue of prostitution in the Arab world.

Woman at Point Zero is a feminist and socialist work in equal measure. The domination of the protagonist's voice throughout is a typical example of a feminist's use of the individual female's experience to criticise the limitations of the sexual and moral codes to which women are subjected by society. In Firdaus's dialogue with the pimp who is trying to control her life, we read:

> "But I can protect myself,' I said.
> 'There isn't a woman on earth who can protect herself.'

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[305] From 1973 to 1976, el-Saadawi researched neurosis in women at the Ain Shams University's Faculty of Medicine. Her results were published in *Women and Neurosis* in Egypt in 1976, which included 20 in-depth case studies of women in prisons and hospitals. This research also inspired *Woman at Point Zero*.

> 'I don't want your protection.'
> 'You cannot do without protection, otherwise the profession exercised by husbands and pimps would die out.'[306]

I would like to note here that it is this feminist trend of using an individual female experience, which replicates the classic feminist methodology of using a female character to represent all women, that has been interpreted by critics to be evidence of Orientalism where the example of the misfortune of one woman will be evidence of the savagery of the Arab culture. I will address with this claim in detail below under section 3.6.3.1.

The novel's criticism of the corruption of Arab governments, the media and the whole of Egyptian society constitutes political commentary from a socialist perspective. Firdaus scolds the Arab prince she meets and tells him that he is wasting the money of his people on prostitutes like herself. When Firdaus becomes rich through prostitution and donates some of her income to charity, she is celebrated as a celebrity figure with papers publishing her photo and interviews. The message seems to be that money is everything in a corrupt society:

> One day, when I donated some money to a charitable association, the newspapers published pictures of me and sang my praises as the model citizen with a sense of civic responsibility. And so from then on, whenever I needed a dose of honour of fame, I had only to draw some money from the bank.[307]

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[306] El-Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero,* 92.
[307] Ibid., 90.

Perhaps the strongest condemnation of social hypocrisy, particularly of those who claim to be working for the common people, is to be found in the character of Ibrahim. Ibrahim is a "revolutionary" figure[308] who works in the company that Firdaus works in after she has given up prostitution to gain self respect in society. Ibrahim becomes her lover, and her enthusiasm for Ibrahim's words, uttered during one of the workers' meetings, is a reflection of 1970s socialist morality in Egypt:

> At a big meeting for the workers I heard him speak about justice and the abolition of privileges enjoyed by management as compared to the workers. We applauded him enthusiastically and stood at the door for a long time to shake his hand.[309]

The fact that Ibrahim abandons their relationship to marry the daughter of the company's manager provides a satire of the hypocrisy of such revolutionaries. In fact the themes of the novel seem to be a dramatization of the themes addressed in el-Saadawi's *The Hidden Face of Eve*. In *The Hidden Face of Eve*, el-Saadawi writes that "in Arab society … one of the primary weapons to keep back the revolt of women and youth is the misuse of Islamic doctrine." *Woman at Point Zero* dramatises the same theme, with Firdaus's uncle refusing to send her to university because he fears her coming into direct contact with men. The theme of the general hypocrisy of religious men runs through the novel with el-Saadawi portraying men, including the protagonist's father, as going regularly to the mosque whilst simultaneously cheating or lying.

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[308] Ibid., 80.
[309] El-Saadawi, *Woman at Point Zero*.

The figure of Firdaus as a prostitute is in itself part of el-Saadawi's long denunciation of poverty in Egypt and of its effect on the population, and elaborates on a point she makes in *The Hidden Face of Eve* that "female domestic servants tend to end up as prostitutes, or cheap cabaret dancers, whose job it is to entertain the tourists and rich Arabs or Egyptians."[310]

In my view the book clearly and unambiguously deals with themes that are socialist and feminist in nature: *The Hidden Face of Eve* reflects the fact that el-Saadawi writes with a critical eye not only on the situation of women in the Egyptian and Arab society, but on those calling themselves revolutionary reformists.

3.6.2 Orientalist discourse in the reception of *Women at Point Zero*

Although standard views assert that Orientalism is a major factor in explaining the successful reception of the book in the West, the case for this is in fact remarkably weak. Although the reception of the work is not free from Orientalist elements, as I will demonstrate, feminism plays a much greater role than with *The Hidden Face of Eve* regarding the successful reception of the book in the West.

First, of all an examination of reviews and academic critical analysis does not reveal any real evidence for the charge that the appeal of the book was related to some kind of 'sensualisation' of Arab women, or that such a theme was emphasised by

[310] El-Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve*.

publishers or distributors in order to enhance sales. Second, it is true that some reviewers saw the issue of Arab women as depicted in the book as exemplifying difference that is in a way familiar to the Orientalist canon. However, this is not done in a prominent, inordinate, essentializing or systematic way. For example, Laila Said's remarks that the novel presents "a valuable opportunity to understand more clearly the currents of thought regarding women in a culture vastly different from the West".[311] The emphasis here on 'vast' difference recapitulates a familiar Orientalist thematic of distancing, as we saw in chapter II (section 2.8), but this kind of response was only one among many and hardly dominated the review. Again, a reader reviewing *Women at Point Zero* on Amazon.com, writing under the following catchy title: "Placated by your charmed American life? This is a cure!" writes:

> Not all women live the life of love, luxury, and respect that American women, for the most part, have. Firdaus, the subject of this book, is a woman lucky enough to have her story told. It isn't pleasant, but it's true. El Saadawi didn't sugar-coat this tale, and I think it's ingenious. Bravo![312]

To understand this kind of exclamation solely in terms of Orientalism is simply to push the boundaries of the discourse too far, partly because the reviewer attributes ingenuity to the author and value to the work, but also because the sorts of distancing involved are not understood in terms of essentialized cultural issues. The American hubris involved in singling out American women as enjoying a 'life of love' whereas presumably the rest of the world – including, for example, Italy – cannot enjoy such elevated sentiments, can

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[311] Laila Said, *Christian Science Monitor*, 5 September 1986, 5. "Literature Resource Center, http://galegroup.com/servlet/LitRC?c=2&ste=36&docNum=H1000029177&KA=Saad1/6/03.
[312] "Placated by your charmed American life? This is a cure!" reader's review of *Woman at Point Zero*. April 5, 2002, Michigan, USA. www.amazon.com.

be attributed to a more particularist and exceptionalist strain in American culture rather than a more general facet of Western Orientalism.

Third, some might see emphatic evidence of Orientalism in the fact that some reviews exhibit a tendency to make broad generalizations about the Arab world and Arab woman on the basis of the book, whilst at the same time seeing only anthropological rather than any literary value in the piece. So for example, *The Guardian* appears to embrace this method, describing *Women at Point Zero* as "a symbolized version of female revolt against the norms of the Arab world."[313] *The Guardian's* commentary suggests that the conflict in the protagonist's life – a prostitute in a very particular milieu – represents the conflict of every Arab woman. A similar general judgment can be found in the *Labour Herald*, where we read that the book is "a powerful indictment of the treatment of women in many parts of the Middle East."[314] The fact is, however, that the pages of *The Guardian* and the *Labour Herald,* along with other forms of published and broadcast media, are littered with these kinds of generalizations about regions, peoples, cultures and nations, which should not always be seen as systematically linked to the particular 'gross political fact' of colonial asymmetry embodied in Orientalism. Again, those who find Orientalism behind every bush are guilty of making the concept so flabby as to be analyticaly unusable.

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[313] Amazon review of el-Saadawi, Woman at point Zero. Amazon. Com: editorial reviews: Woman At Point Zero: review: http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/product-description/0862321107/ref=dp_proddesc_0/102-7927930-2230561?%5Fencoding=UTF8&n=283155

[314] "Two views on being an Arab woman," *Labour Herald*, 13 January 1984, 14. Also, quoted on the back-cover of *Woman at Point Zero.*

Finally, those with hyper-sensitive Orientalist antennae might assume that reviewers have distorted and simplified el-Saadawi's view of Islam. For example, Miriam Cooke of Duke University mentions in relation to the protagonist, that "at an early age … [she] was remanded to the custody of her uncle, an Azhar student, who initiated her educationally and sexually, almost in anticipation of the stream of physical violations that were to follow".[315] It might be possible to argue that it is misleading for a reviewer to make the above statement without making clear the nuanced analysis that el-Saadawi actually has in relation to Islam. As we know, el-Saadawi does not attack Islam *per se* as a negative force for women, but only the way in which it is interpreted by patriarchal institutions in her society. However, Miriam Cooke does not mention a generalized notion of Islam anywhere in this segment. She does speak of Al-Azhar University, which is indeed just one of those institutions at which el-Saadawi took aim. Cooke's review is more generally a nuanced analysis markedly free from Orientalist stereotyping.

3.6.3 Feminist discourse in the reception of *Women at Point Zero*

Instead of over-emphasising Orientalism, it makes more sense to argue that feminism is more responsible for the success of the book in the West. On the whole, reviews of *Woman at Point Zero* are significantly removed from Orientalist discourse and are feminist in nature, with titles such as "Woman's tale worth telling"[316]. Notably, titles of

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[315] Miriam Cooke, a review of *Woman at Point Zero, World Literature Today a Literary Quarterly of the University of Oklahoma* 59, no. 3 (Summer 1985): 483.

[316] George Turner, "Woman's Tale worth Telling", *The Age,* 11 January 1986.

the reviews no longer carry the connotation of the veil or the mysterious and hidden face of the Arab world. As Al-Ali has written, simply enough and without a trace of Orientalism, "the novel certainly constitutes an outstanding and courageous example of the representation of women in literature."[317] Feminist reactions to *Women at Point Zero* can be grouped under two headings: first, those looking at how el-Saadawi politicises the female experience, and, second, those highlighting stylistic and thematic similarities with Western feminist writings.

3.6.3.1 Politicising the female experience

One sort of feminist methodology has always been to use the analysis of an individual woman, including her sexuality and the way in which her society treats her, in order to throw light on the interaction between women and their societies as a whole. This process can be referred to as politicising the individual female experience. Angela Carter argues that:

> It is so enormously important for women to write fiction as women's literature as part of the process of de-colonizing our language and our basic habits of thought. It is to do with the creation of a means of expression for an infinitely greater variety of experience than has been possible heretofore, to say things for which no language previously existed."[318]

What Carter is advocating here is a mode of writing that enables women to represent themselves differently from the way they have been represented in patriarchal discourse.

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[317] Al-Ali, 25.
[318] Angela, Carter. *Nothing Sacred* (London: Virago, 1983), 75.

What is of value in *Woman at Point Zero* for the feminist readership is the simplicity with which el-Saadawi presents the personal experiences of a single character, who effectively and painlessly helps the reader to gain an insight into the basic issues faced by women. George Tuner, a Melbourne novelist and critic celebrates the force and accessibility of el-Saadwai's use of the simple personal experience:

> It is all too easy to become unreceptive to the shriller onslaughts of militant feminism. Then a work appears which is neither shrill nor an onslaught but a simple statement of experience; the doors of the mind fly open again to the persuasion that here is women's need stated in its basic form. "Woman at Point Zero" is novelised from life."[319]

A number of reviews highlight the universalistic message of el-Saadawi's work. For example, *Spare Rib* notes that "*Woman at Point Zero* is the story of one Arab woman, but it reads as if it is every woman's life."[320] By viewing the work as a valid contribution to both Western and eastern issues, reviewers represent a strand of feminism that in no way can be described to have Orientalist superiority or distancing. Reflecting on the universal themes in the text presented through a personal lens, B. Harlow, concludes that *Women at Point Zero* resonates with the larger issues which confront women throughout the Third World as well as in the West, namely, both personal and political repression.[321] Notably recognising the broad politicisation of the novel's theme, *Connexions* writes that "behind the story lies a major radical and feminist analysis of women's oppression not only in the Arab world or the Third World, but the world over".[322]

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[319] Turner, "Woman's Tale worth Telling", 1.
[320] Manny, "*Woman at Point Zero*.", review of *Woman at Point Zero*. *Spare Rib* issue 145, August 1984, 39-40.
[321] Barbra, Harlow. *Resistance Literature* (New York and London: Methuen, 1987), 137.
[322] *Connexions,* quoted on the back-cover of Woman at Point Zero. Zed books. London 1983.

Lionnet, a feminist scholar, interprets the highly personal tone of the book as being el-Saadawi's tool to demolish the distance between herself (as the doctor figure in the novel) and her protagonist, in spite of their social differences. The overall objective, she argues, is for el-Saadawi to universalise the female figure,[323] and she quotes from the Preface which she says makes clear that el-Saadawi identifies herself with the suffering of the protagonist:

> Firdaus is the story of a woman driven by despair, evoked in all those who, like me, witnessed the final moments of her life, a need to challenge and to overcome those forces that deprive human beings of their rights to live, to love and to real freedom"[324].

Lionnet uses her understanding of how such universal yearnings are 'concretized' in a personal biography to conclude:

> The narrative suggests that the universal can be known only through the particular or the personal, that it is the concrete subjective experience of this "other woman" that allows the scholar to relate to her as woman and sister, and to bring her back to life through her writing.[325]

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[323] Lionnet, 36. El Saadawi's attempt to eliminate the distance between herself and other women as a means to identify with their experience and thereby as a means of advocating in favour of the existence of the notion of the universal female experience is also evident in *Memoirs from the Women's Prison.* Talking of Fathiyya, the Murderess, el Saadawi writes: "I look at her strong brown fingers, and it occurs to me that they resemble my fingers. My heart beats as if with the same force which powers her heart... My hand, as it grips the pen, is like her hand when she took hold of the hoe and struck the blow. It is just as if I were striking blows with the pen at a corrupt, black head which wanted to abduct my freedom and life". El-Saadawi, *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*, 116.

[324] El-Saadaw, *Woman at Point Zero*, iv.

[325] Lionnet, 33.

Similarly, a reader from Austin, Texas, reviewing the book under the title "A book for all women", writes:

> I disagree with other reviewers who write that this book is an eye-opener to the terrible lives of Muslim women, or oppressed women in other places. This is absolutely true--it does give the reader a glimpse into the limited and terrifying lives of some Egyptian women; however, the book is much broader in scope than this aspect. This is a book for all women everywhere. Although the main character is a tragic one, her journey and her intelligence teach her the meaning of freedom.[326]

The emphasis on how this is a book for 'all women everywhere' in this otherwise passage with popular, rather than academic appeal, indicates that a reader unbound by constraints of academic political correctness has seized on universality rather than particularism in their reception of the work.

Significantly, el-Saadawi's methodological and narrative approach is similar to that of other feminisits in the West and elsewhere, in that she politicises female suffering through an in-depth analysis into women's sexuality, often using a single character's sexuality to do so. For example, the way el-Saadawi uses the protagonist of *Woman at Point Zero* as a tool to denounce the female oppression in society has a universal appeal. As Lionnet notes:

> El-Saadawi's novel Woman at Point Zero is, with Evelyne Accad's *L'excisee*, one of the few fictional accounts written with moving sincerity and autobiographical detail. It is a more effective and convincing denunciation

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[326] "A book for all women" a reader's review of *Woman at Point Zero* , January 10, 2002

> than many pragmatic or political treatises because it allows the reader to enter into the subjective processes of the individual, to adopt her stance.[327]

El-Saadawi not only has the courage and insight to undertake an in-depth analysis of the way in which women relate to their bodies, and the way in which they instinctively feel and reflect on the negative events, including violence, constraints and limitations to which their body is subjected throughout its life. She also takes the fruits of this process and places it in a wider context for metaphorical use to look at the social and political constraints placed on women. Firdaus' memories relating to the experiences of her body, including circumcision, entirely dominate her memories of her life, and her sudden realisation that for her entire life her body has been subjected to the decisions of others helps her to summon up the mental strength she needs to murder her pimp as a statement of her independence.

Many believe that it was el-Saadawi's courage and initiative in addressing women's sexuality which continues to distinguish her from previous female Arab feminists. This is evident in al-Hassan Golley's remark of el-Saadawi that "she is almost the first Arab woman to raise the issue of sexual oppression publicly in a daring manner; before her, only forms of social, economic, and political oppression were discussed by Arab

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[327] Lionnet, 23. This interpretation of her writing stands in stark contrast to the way in which some commentators have reacted to her writing on the topic as a tool with which to distance themselves as westerners from the reality of the women of whom el-Saadawi writes, as set out above.

feminists."[328] Surely el-Saadawi's ability to politicise female suffering is consistent with every woman struggling for empowerment.

Finally, Raekha Prasad, writing on el-Saadawi in *The Guardian* Profile, quotes el-Saadawi's view of her own life's work as relating different aspects of life, including the role played by the body, to one another:

> To see the human body as a whole, to see society and body as a whole, to see society and knowledge as a whole…To break down and analyse, only to build up and synthesise. This was my progression from the particular to the general, from the personal to the political, from one woman to all women, from the individual to the collective."[329]

This demonstrates that el-Saadawi's commentary of the relationship between the self and society is not designed to scandalize as sometimes argued but as a means of deconstruction to further our understanding.

3.6.3.2 Thematic and Stylistic Similarity

In choosing to set out her thoughts on the condition of Arab women in general through looking at the particular experience of an individual female character in her novels, el-Saadawi embraces an approach long deployed by Western feminists. For feminists, the power of the novel lies in the voice it provides for women who have long been silenced

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[328] Al-Hassan Golley, 131. This comment is made in a chapter dedicated to el-Saadawi in a book presenting a number of Arab feminist writers in which she notes that el-Saadawi's chapter is the longest because of her status as a key Arab feminist.
[329] Prasad, "Lone Star of the Nile", 6.

by patriarchal societies. According to the Algerian writer Assia Djebar, this applies to the feminist Arab novel in general and to el-Saadawi's major work *Woman at Point Zero* in particular. Djebar writes in her introduction to the translation of the novel: "What is a feminist novel in Arabic? First of all, it is a voice – here, a voice 'in hell' of a woman … An ancient wound finally and gradually opened up to assume its song." [330]

A major criticism of el-Saadawi's stylistic abilities is that her work is dominated by her own voice which takes over from that of the characters. For Djebar, however, this does not diminish the literary value of her work. On the contrary, it is here, in el-Saadawi's strong voice challenging the guardians and masters of patriarchal society, that the value of the work lies. She calls this "the birth of a word" and praises el-Saadawi for rising to the challenge and for refusing to adapt to the traditional form of writing where the author's voice remains effaced.[331] She says that el-Saadawi has introduced a "fresh discursive field" that will allow greater freedom for future generations of Arab women writers. Djebar concludes that through her courageous use of language, el-Saadawi has paved the way for a new form of writing. In her introduction to the French translation of *Women at Point Zero*, Djebar writes, "we women from the Maghreb … have rolled about in the Arabic language as though in a grotto of fear, of memories and of ancestors whispering". In contrast to criticism of el-Saadawi's style, she states of el-Saadawi's work:

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[330] Assia Djebar, "Introduction to Nawal el-Saadawi's Ferdaous: A Voice from Hell", in *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing,* ed. Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke (Virgo Press, 1990), 387.
[331] Ibid., 388.

A new, fresh discursive field is imperceptibly traced for other Arab women. A point for take-off. A combat zone. A restoration of body. Bodies of new women in spite of new barriers which in the internal, interior language at once retracted and proclaimed, public and no longer secret find roots before rushing forth … a loud voice that gives body. This book is dealing with birth --- birth of a word.[332]

This echoes the view of Jennifer McBride, for whom el-Saadawi's feminist endeavours to articulate women's desire for self expression "have widened the boundaries of the Arab novel".[333] Of course it might be argued that by setting a standard to which others have to adapt, to she limits the stylistic options of subsequent writers, and risks an Orientalist style setting benchmarks for others. However, it is again too broad to see innovative or influential literary styles which set standards for future writers as a form of Orientalism. With this definition, few forms of significant or original authorial intervention could stand outside Orientalism – clearly an unacceptable and absurdly general outcome.

Lionnet argues that by blurring the distinction between commensurable categories such as the characters of doctor and prisoner or the styles of fiction and documentary, el-Saadawi follows a pattern of writing "common to the genre of the feminine confession."[334] For Lionnet then, el-Saadawi's work can be seen as a typical feminist work both in terms of its aesthetics and subject matter.[335]

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[332] Ibid., 37-388.
[333] ("Introduction to el-Saadawi"– posted on http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/ sadawi.htm, posted in 2000).
[334] Lionnet, 33.
[335] Rita Felski: writes "what … are the reasons for this blurring of the distinction between autobiography and fiction in feminist literature? Feminist confession exemplifies the intersection between the autobiographical imperative to communicate the truth of unique individuality and the feminist concern

3.6.4 Limits on Feminism

The foregoing is not intended to paint a wholly positive picture of feminist reception. Western feminists received el-Saadawi's work according to their own particular agenda, which although was only tainted by Orientalism to a degree, in fact suffered from other blind spots, usually missed by those determined to shoehorn her reception into an undifferentiated form of Orientalism. Although el-Saadawi filled a feminist knowledge vacuum as set out above, there is evidence of how that vacuum was quite narrow in nature. I would argue that feminist reviews of *Women at Point Zero* in particular have generally failed to address the socialist analysis of the novel which looks at political and economic forces at work in Egypt. Instead, searching only for gender, feminists have presented the novel as relating only to specific examples and themes of female oppression. This selectivity is driven by a desire to simplify the themes into clear categories favourable to a straightforward feminist analysis, which is attractive to an audience more interested in the personalised nature of the issues rather than in a complex historical and culturally relative analysis of the reality of the lives of Arab women. In other words it involves a consciously orchestrated selectivity for rendering her work attractive for perspective feminist readers.[336]

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with the representative and inter-subjective elements of women's experience. Feminist confession often reveals particularly clearly the contradictions between the desire for total intimacy and union, which seeks to erase all boundaries between desire and its object, and the act of writing as a continuing deferral of any such identity." Lionnet, 35.

[336] Similarly it is not only feminists who seek to simplify the portrayal of her work. In the past, el-Saadawi received the attention of several major media outlets in the US. However, as a result of her becoming increasingly politically outspoken on topics such as the role of the western media and the western

An interesting example of this selectivity comes where reviewers ignore the political and economic dimensions and meanings of el-Saadawi's depiction of women. The death of the protagonist Firdaus in the novel, who perished through her failure to respect the patriarchal role allocated to her by society, was intended in part by el-Saadawi to symbolize the notion that Egypt had prostituted itself within the world economy, and that Egypt was therefore likely to suffer the same ultimate fate as the protagonist: death. El-Saadawi expounded this view in her presentation to the World Social Forum in Zimbabwe, for example. Aware that not many reviewers share such analysis of that particular work or indeed of any of her other works, Sherifa Zuhur, writes that "el Saadawi's Third Worldist and Marxist perspectives have not always been understood, or appreciated either by scholars of the Middle East, or Western feminists who fail to understand Egypt's postcolonial sensitivities."[337] With specific reference to the way in which economic factors affect gender relations in the developing world, she also states "it might sound nonsensical to a Western feminist to point to underdevelopment as a source of stress on gender relations, but many other feminists of the developing world

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multinational, the same outlets have effectively decided to ignore her. This is also argued in *Dissidence and Creativity, Wholeness and Censorship* (Lavin, 1) where her opposition to the corporate controlled media and her anti-capitalist stand in general is put forward as the explanation for decreased exposure in the US mass media. In her 2000 promotional tour for *Daughter of Isis* in New York, both *The New York Times Review* and *Newsweek* totally ignored her, despite the fact that both newspapers previously celebrated her as the principal Arab figure opposing female circumcision. El-Saadawi herself is aware of the consequences of trying to sell her socialist criticism of imperialist America, as can be seen when considering the fact that she accepted that the Preface to the American edition to *The Hidden Face of Eve* was a politically watered down version of the Preface to the version published in the UK.

[337] Sherifa Zuhur. "Woman at Point Zero: Nawal el Saadawi," a chapter by Sherifa Zuhur published on Nawal el-Saadawi and Sherif Hetata "Articles about Saadawi". webpage. http://www.nawalsaadawi.net/articles/sherifazuhur.htm. This chapter is also published in World Literature and Its Times: Africa. Los Angeles: Moss Publishing, 2001.

agree with el-Saadawi on this point."[338] In short, feminists narrowly pursuing a gender-centric debate, manage to ignore international and neo-colonial themes familiar to Marxists and socialists.

In the same vein, reference to her term of imprisonment, upon which the source of the novel is based, is incorrectly attributed entirely to her feminist agenda. Tellingly enough, a large number of the reviews or commentaries neglect to mention the socialist dimension of her activities at the time of her imprisonment, but which were the main reason for her imprisonment.[339]

It is interesting to note that on purely methodological grounds, the selection process used by Orientalists is a method mirrored to some extent in the selection process of feminists. Both are drawing out those themes that reinforce the main tenets of their discourse. As we have seen, they engage in a process of either criticising the author for omitting a theme (for example the Orientalist criticism of a lack of condemnation of Islam) or themselves happily omitting a theme the author highlights (the feminist omission of reference to broader economic and political themes). Both are arguably thereby playing to what both groups of selectors believe to be the horizon of expectation of their readers. As I have argued earlier, the attempt of the early Women's Movement in the West to universalise its own middle class experience of oppression has meant that it concentrated

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[338] Ibid.

[339] In a commentary on el Saadawi in Merriam-Webster's *Encyclopaedia of Literature* we read the following of el-Saadawi: "Expelled from her professional position in the Cairo Ministry of Health in 1972 because of her feminism, el Saadawi was imprisoned for *the same reason for two months in 1981.* (Emphasis added. *Merriam –Webster's Encyclopedia of Literature* © 1995.) The real reason for her second tem of imprisonment was her political opposition to el-Sadat's economical and political policies.

its struggle around issues of sexuality. In adopting her chosen method, el-Saadawi makes herself immediately attractive to a feminist audience.

3.7 The Reception of el-Saadawi's Work post *Women at Point Zero*

3.7.1 General Comments

In her novels, short stories and non-fiction work published in English post *Women at Point Zero*, el-Saadawi deals mainly with the status of Arab women. *God Dies by the Nile*[340] is a strong example of this subject matter. Some of her books, including *the Fall of the Imam*[341] and *The Innocence of the Devil*[342] go into the more specific theme of women's oppression being caused by the patriarchal use of religion. The reception of these works, following the English translation and publication of *Woman at Point Zero*, remains relatively successful, even though combined they sold fewer copies than either of her first two publications in English. I consider the fact that they were reviewed in a substantial number of journals, and that they attracted other publishers such as American United Press (AUP) and Women Press in addition to her original sponsor Zed Books, to be an indication of her success. My main argument to follow is that the Orientalist discourse, so dominant in the feminist reception of her first book, is only weakly present in later works such as *Woman at Point Zero*. I will now turn to five of her most

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[340] *Mawt al-rajul al-waḥīd 'alā al-'arḍ*. 3 ed. al-Qāhira: Maktabat madbūlī, 1983.
[341] *Suqūṭ al- 'imām*. al-Qāhira: Dar al-mustaqbal al-'arabī, 1987.
[342] *Mawt al-rajul al-waḥīd 'alā al-'arḍ*. 3 ed. al-Qāhira: Maktabat madbūlī, 1983.

significant books – based on their prominence in literary criticism and academic analysis – in chronological order, based on their dates of publication in English.

3.7.2 Five Selected Books Translated into English post *Women at Point Zero*

I introduce the context and major themes of the books below before moving on to their reception.

3.7.2.1 *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*[343]

Memoirs of a Woman Doctor is a novel that was fist published through a serialisation in Arabic in 1957 in an Arabic feminist journal (Ruz al-Yusuf). Described by Al-Hassan Gollery as fictional autobiography, it was translated by Catherine Cobham and published by al-Saqi Publishers in 1986. The date of publication of the original Arabic shows the strength and originality of el-Saadawi's feminist consciousness and her attempt to reach self-realisation, and also that this process began long before she had contact with Western feminists.

Feminist issues dominate this novel, although the political theme of class consciousness also appears at the end as a major theme. Although the feminist issues addressed in the novel seemed out-dated to Western feminists by the time the book was published in

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[343] Nawal el-Saadawi, *Memoirs of a Woman Docto.* Trans. Catherine Cobham (London: Zed Books, 1988). *Mudhakkirāt ṭabība.* 3rd ed. al-Qāhira: Maktabat madbūlī, 1983.

English, it has been recognised by others in the West as being "the first radical Arab feminist work".[344] Gollery considers it to be a breakthrough in Arabic literature, "not as a genre but in its content and feminist spirit."[345]

The novel is narrated in the first person by the protagonist who is battling with herself and society in attempt to reach self-realisation. The protagonist does not have a name, which is taken by some to be a reference to the low status of the female child in Egyptian society. The low status of the character is made clear from the beginning of the novel where the narrator specifies the limited negative role she plays as a female character in contrast to the role played by her brother:[346]

> And there was only one meaning for the word "girl" in my mind…that I was not a boy… I was not like my brother…My brother goes out in the street to play, without permission form my mother or father, and returns at any time…but I, I do not go out without permission.

The novel looks at how the concepts of "femininity" and "masculinity" are social constructs rather than biological categories, and also how women struggle to achieve their identity within a society which pressurises them to conform to the social demands flowing from these concepts of identity.

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[344] Al-Hassan Gollery, 134.
[345] Ibid., 149.
[346] It is also worth noting that this painting of an introductory scene which focuses on such low status of the main female child character as contrasted to the favoured male child character is a technique that is used by many Arab woman writers, with examples being found in the works of writers such as Fadwa Tuqan and Sahar Khalifa.

The protagonist develops an awareness of her identity through the medical context in which she lives and the associated medical discourse of which she is a part. As a medical student exposed to the basic physical humanity of every human being, she gains an insight into the fundamental equality of women and men, which stands in stark contrast to what she has always been taught by her mother and her society. This use of medical discourse is highly significant as it brings el-Saadawi's approach to feminist issues into line with Western feminist thought. As we have seen above, medical issues were at the heart of Western feminist activism in the world of education and so the novel's theme was naturally always going to be attractive for Western feminists.

3.7.2.2 *The Circling Song*[347]

The Circling Song was first published in Arabic in 1973 and was translated into English in 1989. It describes a culture in which women live submissive lives and are taught to react with shame to the ordeals they may face, such as rape or clitorectomy. The novel is elegantly translated by Marilyn Booth. Two feminist arguments are touched upon in the novel: firstly, the continuation of el-Saadawi's challenge to the socially manufactured separation of man and woman; and secondly the topic of rape and the associated stigmatisation of the victim and the practice of honour-killing.

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[347] Nawal el-Saadaawi, *The Circling Song* (London: Zed Books, 1989). *al-Wajih al-'ārī Lil-mar'a al-'arabiya*. Bayrūt: al-Mūa'ssasa al-'arabiya lil-dirāsāt wa-al-nashir, 1977.

The protagonist Hamida is a peasant girl who is raped by a member of her family and who thereby becomes pregnant. Her mother smuggles her onto a train to Cairo to save her from the honour killing that is likely to ensue and it is indeed her father who sends her brother Hamido to reclaim the family's honour through killing his sister.

El-Saadawi adopts a literary style that enables her to comment on the events involving both Hamida and Hamido, and which brings to the fore her view of the social oppression that is brought to bear on both men and woman. El-Saadawi switches between the almost interchangeable stories of the two principle characters (the sister and the brother) which achieves a sense of constant surprise (and at times almost confusion) on the part of the reader. This technique can also be understood as a reflection of el-Saadawi's belief and argument that the apparent differences between men and women is socially, and not biologically, constructed.

3.7.2.3 *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*[348]

Translated by Marilyn Booth and published in English in 1986 by Women's Press, *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* is based on el-Saadawi's three month experience in jail, with a number of other writers who had written to the authorities to express their anger against the political, social and economic injustice practiced by al-Sadat's repressive regime. The book is made up of a combination of her diaries written whilst in

[348] *Mudhakkirātī fī sijn al-Nisā'.* 1ed. al-Qāhira: Dar al-mustaqbal al-'arabī, 1984.

prison and recollections of her time in prison written shortly after her release. It is written as a series of flashbacks. El-Sadaawi herself has noted that:

> I wrote some of my prison memories on toilet paper in the cell… during my nights in prison… When I came out of prison I revised some of them, added some, which I deposited in my memory. So, I can say that I did some rewriting for a part of it (not all).[349]

The work has the stylistic feel of a novel, though I feel that the reader is distracted from the flow of the literary narrative by interspersed documentary-type commentary. El-Saadawi appears to present the experiences both of herself and of her fellow inmates as a reflection of the daily experience of the average Egyptian woman living under the oppression of Sadat's social and political rule. Political themes are explicit: she protests against the absence of democracy and basic human rights and address issues such as nationalism and patriotism.

3.7.2.4 *God Dies by the Nile*[350]

God Dies by the Nile was published in Arabic in and was translated into English in 1985. It is a political allegory of the struggle and emptiness of Egyptian peasants' lives. The story tells of a woman forced to witness the abuse of her nieces at the hands of a mayor, to endure the pain of not knowing whether her child is alive or dead and more broadly it speaks of the poverty of the Egyptian peasantry. The mayor, a tyrant and oppressor, is

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[349] Al-Hassan Golley, 151.
[350] *Suqūṭ al- ʾimām*. al-Qāhira: Dar al-mustaqbal al-ʿarabī, 1987.

half English and is taken by many to represent 19th and 20th century colonialism and many also represent the figure of al-Sadat on the basis that al-Sadat is considered by many to have been economically submissive to the West.

The novel starts with the protagonist going to the fields to begin her daily work and ends with her killing the tyrant mayor. The hypocrisy of men of religion and of politicians is represented in the three male characters who accompany the mayor at all times. As the novel develops we come to recognise the mayor's tyranny, the hypocrisy of the men surrounding him and the suffering of the oppressed villagers.

The book is generally taken to contain an excellent combination of socialist criticism and literary technique. In contrast to those, critics such as Sabry Hafez, who do not consider el- Saadawi's work to qualify as quality literature[351], Royer considers it to be

> a tapestry in which the rhythms of life and work interweave and echo in patterns: animals, farming, and hard labour in the fields evoke memories, smells and vision form the characters' childhood. Appeals to the senses become a supporting structure for el Saadawi's themes about the victimization of the peasant, especially the woman peasant. [352]

The novel was banned in some Arab countries because it was considered to be anti-Islamic, a fact to which el-Saadawi drew attention at the Cairo Annual International Book Fair in 2001. She explained that she had written part of it during her time in prison

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[351] Sabry Hafez. "Intentions and realisation in the narratives of Nawal El-Saadawi," *Third World Quarterly* 11, no.3 (July 1989).
[352] Royer, 121.

and that the Imam in her novel represented al-Sadat who had ordered her arrest and imprisonment: "He described himself as 'the President Believer' but I did not think that he was a 'believer' at all. I wanted to unmask what corrupt rulers actually do".[353] She went on to describe the position taken by Al-Azhar as "a threat to her life, and an instigation towards her assassination."[354]

3.7.2.5 *The Nawaal el-Saadawi Reader*[355]

The Nawaal el-Saadawi Reader is a collection of articles and lectures that el-Saadawi wrote and delivered between 1976 and 1997. The work covers a wide range of topics which includes those of women and Islam (with a particular emphasis on the impact of fundamentalist Islam), el-Saadawi's personal experience and the collective experience with her Third World colleagues with Western feminists, the economic and cultural divide between the North and the South, the role played by literature in women's emancipation and finally her analysis of the role of literature under the heading of "Dissidence and Creativity".

Overall it should be clear that these books represent an extension and development of the major themes already broached in her first two major works. As outlined in Chapter II, a favoured methodology of feminists in seeking to articulate a picture that may not be expressed if left to the male version of reality, is that of giving women the chance to

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[353] Cairo - Egypt 29 May 2004 http://www.nawalsaadawi.net/news/2004/azharbans.htm
[354] ibid.

voice their personal experiences, and el-Saadawi continued to embrace this method in these five later works whole-heartedly. El-Saadawi herself implicitly championed this approach early on when stating that:

> The portrayal of the Arab women in past and contemporary Arab literature does not reflect a genuine image of her. It is Arab woman as seen through the eyes of Arab men, and therefore tends to be incomplete, distorted and devoid of a clear understanding and consciousness.[356]

Ramazanoglu has underlined the personal female experience of the female writer as an important factor in producing feminist knowledge. She argues that protagonists of feminist subjective knowledge need to be selective and capable of interpreting their "personal experiences in terms of sexual politics", and need to develop an awareness of concepts such as patriarchy and oppression.[357] El-Saadawi's work continues to be distinguished by her ability to incorporate her personal experience in political terms into her writing. Interestingly, when we turn to analyse their reception we note the increasingly diminished salience of Orientalism and an even more marked feminism.

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[356] El-Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve*, 166.
[357] Ramazanoglu, 52.

3.7.3 Feminist and Other Reactions to post *Women at Point Zero*

The feminist reaction to el-Saadawi's post *Women at Point Zero* English translations is considerably greater than the Orientalist reaction. I have placed these reactions under five thematic headings: her credibility as a committed Arab feminist writing on universal themes (3.7.4.1), her writings being seen as constituting classic feminist writing (3.7.4.2), the academic embrace and continued academic support of her work (3.7.4.3), her interesting personal history and anthropological need for material as a redeeming and sustaining factor (3.7.4.4), and finally her attractive feminist style (3.7.4.5).

3.7.4.1 Credibility as a committed Arab feminist writing on universal themes

El-Saadawi became even more clearly and vividly celebrated as a writer addressing universal themes transcending Islamic culture, having historical and theoretical significance, and holding up the mirror to life. For example, Katrina Payne writes that "el-Saadawi's views open all women's eyes to the lies that bind us – and these lies apply to women throughout the world, not purely to Islamic countries."[358] Equally, in a review of *Daughter of Isis*, we read that "this is highly recommended as an insightful look into one woman's struggle"[359] and that "its appearance, long overdue in English, provides an important document in women's history generally and in the history of women in the

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[358] Katrina Payne. "Removing the veil" review of *The Nawal el Saadawi Reader Sibyl* 3 (July- August 1998): 21-23.
[359] Jenny Presnell, *Library Journal* (1999 June 15).

Middle East".[360] And in a review of *The Nawal el Saadawi Reader,* Zeina Zaatari, of the University of California, writes that "the most interesting and intriguing aspect of Nawal el Saadawi's writing is her ability to incorporate personal matters with general, theoretical, and analytical concepts. Her writing resembles life in more than one way."[361]

Her work is seen as having significance for women involved in political and everyday struggles against different forms of oppression, themes which are also seen as having relevance for all women everywhere. Writing on her committed militancy over the years post *Woman at Point Zero*, a reviewer of *The Reader* concludes that el-Saadawi stands as "a constant thorn in the side of the class and patriarchal system… [and] continues undeterred to fight for equality – of gender, nation and race." [362] Looking at the broad sweep of the vast range of topics she has covered, it is noted that "through her writing she sheds new light on the power of women in resistance –against poverty, racism, fundamentalism and inequality of all kinds." [363] A review of *Two Women in One* maintains that "while the novel speaks directly on behalf of many women in the third world and the daily struggles they face, all women will find passages which strike a profound chord."[364] Using a wider lens to examine the novel under the title "The systematic and widespread oppression of half of Egypt", *Kirkus Review* writes with reference to *The Innocence of the Devil*:

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[360] Elizabeth W. Fernea of The University of Texas, Austin , MESA Bulletin, 193.
[361] "North/South: The Nawal El Saadawi Reader," *Middle East Women's Studies* xiii, no. 4 & xiv, no 1. (Winter/ Spring 1999).
[362] Fred Rhodes, "Review of The Nawal el-Saadawi Reader: A selection of the works of Nawal el-Saadawi," *The Middle East* (April 1998), 46.
[363] ibid., 46.
[364] *West Africa*, "The right to choose" review of Two Women in One. by Nawal el-Saadawi. (22 July 1985), 1502.

> Set in a madhouse, [and] this modern passion play portrays Egypt's harsh patriarchal society and its devastating repression of women. Saadawi makes the injustices that take place in her novel's asylum reflect on all of Egypt[365]

This way of understanding how el-Saadawi's work sheds light on all of Egyptian society is not tainted by Orientalism, as it does not come loaded with an asymmetrical baggage of stereotypical assumptions or basic ontological distinctions between East and West. This does not mean, of course, that claims to representativeness are not problematic, but, in this case, they are outside of the problematic of Orientalism.

3.7.4.2 Classic Feminist Writing

In a number of reviews, el-Saadawi's works, often described as moving, engaging and shocking, are argued to be classics in their own right. *Memoirs from the Women's Prison,* for example, has been described as "a classic of prison writing; it touches all who are concerned with political oppression, intellectual freedom, and personal dignity".[366] Barta-Moran describes *God Dies by the Nile* as "a graceful classic"[367]. Furthermore, her works are compared to those of successful Western writers. Echoing chapter II's description of how reviewers seek to render foreign novels more familiar to the horizon of expectation of their readers (section 2.5.1), both *The Jerusalem Report* and *Ms* elevate el-Saadawi as being the Arab world's answer to Simone de Beauvoir.

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[365] Book reviews of *The Innocence of the Devil.* "Nawal al-Saadawi Bookshelf". http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Aegean/8821/bkstr_nawal_alsaadawi.html//Innocence
[366] Amazon, book describtion, review of *Memoirs from the Women's Prison.* www.amazon.com
[367] Barta-Moran, *Women's Review* on the front cover of *God Dies by The Nile*, Zed books, 1985

Her name was portrayed to be "synonymous with the struggles against sexual discrimination and for women's social and intellectual freedom."[368]

Similarly, *Memoirs from the Women's Prison* has been compared to Rigoberta Menchu and Nadine Gordimer, with el-Saadawi thereby attracting the accolade of being "one of the world's leading feminist authors".[369] On the back cover of *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*, Cynthia Enloe, author of *The Morning After*, writes:

> If Kafka had been a feminist, his prisoner might have had Nawal el-Saadawi's feistiness, maybe like her he would have hoed a prison garden, led veiled and unveiled cellmates in rebellious callisthenics, strategized with a murderess to foil state illogic".[370]

Readers also consider some of her novels as good enough to be considered classics. Linda Linguvic from New York City has posted on Amazon.com a review of *Women at Point Zero* under the title "Haunting sad story with an underlying feminist agenda".[371] For her, the novel is excellent in literary terms, "somewhat of an underground classic", and she opines that "the prose is clear, simple and melodic and the voice is haunting". Another reader's review of the same work, under the title "So true, so brutally honest, so

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[368] Quoted in Literature Resource Centre. "Nawal el Saadawi" 1-9. Nawal el-Saadawi, "Islam's Radical Prophetess," an interview with Nawal el- Saadawi, by Rochelle Furstenber, *The Jerusalem Report* (February 28, 1991), 15.

[369] Amzaon Review, review of *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*. www.amazon.com

[370] *Amazon Review*

[371] Linda Linguvic, review of *Woman at Point Zero, by Nawal el-Saadawi. www.amazon.com November 7, 2003*

sad", states that "it is a wonder that this book has not been turned into a movie. But its message is scary and all too easy to agree with. Beautifully written".[372]

One does not, of course, have to agree with the mixture of hyperbole and naivety underlying some of these reviews, but it is clear that we are a long way from an older discourse of Orientalism, and into a realm where readerships are able to see el-Saadawi's works as repeating an archetypal gesture recognized as 'classic'.

3.7.4.3 Academic support

The importance of the academic field is in its ability to canonize the work within the hosting cultural framework as discussed in chapter II. [373] El-Saadawi's readership is almost exclusively feminist and most of these readers are academic.[374] A number of books which focus on women writers in general and Arab women writers in particular include selections of her novels, essays and articles, while others are entirely devoted to an analysis of her work. In addition to published books, it is also a number of articles, literary reviews[375] and Ph.D theses that have ensured a prominent place for el-Saadawi

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[372] Linda Linguvic, reader review of Woman at Point Zero, 6 November 2002. S Doyle from Philadelphia, PA, United States

[373] See chapter II, section 2.4.2.2.

[374] According to Alena Williams, who interviewed el-Sadaawi, "few outside select literary and academic circles are familiar with Ms. Saadawi's work." Alena Williams, *The New York Times*, 16 October 1997. In the same interview, el-Saadawi herself notes that her writings are read mainly by academics or "lefties". Alena Williams, *The New York Times*, 16 October 1997.

[375] Feminist literary reviews not only provide a critical review of her work but also advertise them before they have appeared on the market. By way of example, *Everywoman* and the *Feminist Bookstore News* advertised *The Circling Song* in September 1989 and *Feminist Book Fortnight* advertised *Searching* in 1991. At the end of an interview with el-Saadawi, *Spare Rib,* draws attention top the fact that "Nawal el-Saadawi has two new books to be published in Britain in the coming month *Searching and My Travels*

in feminist literary studies. In summary, she is seen as an essential contributor to academic feminism.

I would attribute her continued academic success to four main factors. Firstly, there is the phenomenal success of her first two books which established her as a major feminist author. Secondly, in the 1990s academic feminists continued to maintain a general interest in continuing to gain insight into the views of Arab feminists and post-colonial scholars looking at the broader third world context.[376] Thirdly, some American feminist academics, such as Fedwa Malti-Douglas, feel that el-Saadawi's writing style is close to the style of writing used by some Western feminists. Finally, her continuous presence in the West as a member of the international women's movement, which often finds strong institutional and intellectual support in the academy, has undoubtedly also played a role in her continued academic success.

Turning to *academic* reviews and commentaries of her post *Women at Point Zero* work that are non-Orientalist in nature, there are a number of interesting examples worth citing. I will also look at commentary that has accompanied her inclusion on feminist and post-colonial studies reading lists.

Around the World." The journal also offers a free copy of *Searching* for its "first 200 new subscribers." Spare Rib, March 1991, 15.

[376] *God Dies by the Nile* is included on the 2004-2005 reading list of a course entitled "Reading Politics: Empire and the Postcolonial. An Introduction to Post-Colonial Studies" at the University of Alberta, Middle Eastern and African Studies Department.

An Editorial Review in *Library Journal* has included commentary on el-Saadawi's *Walking Through Fire*:

> El-Saadawi brings to life the politics, economics, and culture of a country enmeshed in colonization, imperialism, terrorism, and traditional patriarchal Islamic moral and religious values. Her honesty, strength, courage, and accomplishments are admirable and inspiring. This is essential for women's studies collections and should be in all public and academic libraries."[377]

Here Islam is clearly contextualized within a broader sociology. Some might say that any reference to Islam which was at the same time critical in the reception of el-Saadawi would imply some form of Orientalism. This sort of facile analysis would eschew any analysis of religion and culture in understanding human society. In my view, therefore, to condemn this kind of reception as Orientalism is to protest too much, and to reveal the way that Orientalism structures one's own thinking. Contemporary social criticism does not require Orientalism to bring its tools to bear on societies around the world. This, indeed, is the attitude adopted by reviewers such as Ali Houissa, who clearly situates el-Saadawi's work within a larger set of global issues. Reviewing *The Nawal el-Saadawi Reader*, Ali Houissa writes that el-Saadawi

> Goes beyond narrow feminist themes. They deal with issues that affect women globally and can threaten their survival, such as identity and equality, social and economic justice, health, religious fundamentalism and literature. The author analyzes each of these topics in her poignant, penetrating, yet simple style and often adopts a comparative stance, contrasting the condition of women in Egypt and Middle Eastern countries with that in other societies. She never loses sight of the global challenges that all women face. Highly

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[377] Jeris Cassel, "editorial review," review of *Walking Through Fire , by Nawal el-Saadaw.* Rutgers Univ. Libs., New Brunswick, NJ Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc. www.amazon.com.

> recommended for all library collections and essential for collections about women."[378]

It is interesting to note that the implicit categorizations made by reviewers now demonstrate that el-Saadawi is thought of in a box marked 'feminist literature' rather than a box marked 'Islam' or 'the Arab world'– for better or for worse. For example, Mary Caroll reviews *The Nawal El-Saadawi Reader* alongside a non-Arab, non-Muslim work – Tessier's *Dancing after the Whirlwind Feminist Reflections on Sex, Denial, and Spiritual Transformations* – and crucially this juxtaposition passes without comment. And my sense is that readerships would not see this juxtaposition as in any way peculiar or problematic, implying the distance travelled from an earlier reception in terms of markedly Orientalist themes. Even more telling, Caroll's review is able to accommodate difference *not* within an Orientalist discourse. She writes, for example, that "Libraries with active women's studies collections will want to consider these quite *different* [emphasis added] volumes."[379] Even while recognizing difference, there is no immediate appeal to, or sense of, the importance of difference based on fundamental ontological, historical and epistemological distinctions as in the structure of Orientalist discourse.

El-Saadawi's work is also seen to contribute to a broad range of topical academic interests. Her prison writing is included in a number of academic critical works on the writing of women in authoritarian states, such as in *Resistance Literature* by Barabara

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[378] Ali Houissa, Cornell Univ., Ithaca, N.Y, reader's review of *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader.* Copyright 1997 Reed Business Information, Inc. http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1856495140/104-8907247-4290343?v=glance&n=283155

[379] Mary Caroll, review of *The Nawal El-Saadawi Reader, by Nawal el-Saadawi. Booklist*, 15 December 1997

Harlow.[380] Likewise, there is no sense of peculiarity about the inclusion of works such as the *The Hidden Face of Eve* among other kinds of feminist readings such as "*Gendering North South Politics*" and "*Women Organizing for Change*". Nawar al-Hassan Golley is interested in el-Saadawi's prison writing as part of her analysis of Arab women's autobiographies. In the introduction to a chapter entitled "Nawal el-Saadawi", Golley states that she is "dedicating a long chapter to this one writer for… el Saadawi is one of the most prolific feminist writers in twentieth-century Arab countries."[381]

El-Saadawi's writings fulfil the traditional aim sought by academia in documenting insights into and information about a culture. Prasad writes in *The Guardian* that, her novels veer towards reportage: clear and precise accounts of stories previously untold" and goes on to quote el-Saadawi: "I have my utmost pleasure when I am writing my novels…it is the present tense, the here and now, that I enjoy. It's my constitution. I love novels more than anything because they help us to understand."[382]

Indeed, el-Saadawi's works are generally celebrated in reviews as anthropologically valuable, as well as for their testimonial merit in reporting the lives of the Egyptian and Arab women in general. I believe this reflects Western feminists' understanding that their readership is more interested in the anthropological side of Arab women's lives than they are in analysing the broad social forces underpinning that experience. Also I

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[380] Harlow discusses in *Resistance Literature* (1987) el-Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* and *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*.
[381] Al-Hassan Golley, 131.
[382] Prasad, "Lone star of the Nile", 6.

would argue that this anthropological interest has come from the vacuum created by Western feminist's interest in Third World women. It is notable that almost all reviews of her literary works starting from *Woman at Point Zero* pay most attention to the person and history of the author, and continue to describe the value of the work in relation to its informative nature on the life of Arab women. Commentary on the literary merit (or lack of it) of the work under review often appears at the end of reviews.

Turning to el-Saadawi's continued inclusion on academic reading lists relating to introductions to feminism and to Third World feminism, *The Nawal el-Saadawi Reader* is prominent on a number of Gender Studies course lists, including on courses that are general in nature. An example is the 2005 course run by Professor Claudia Klaver in the United States, entitled "Literary Texts: Contemporary Text, Political Contexts". Starting with American feminist figures of the 1970s and 1980s such as Adrienne Rich and Audrey, the course covers other political and global contexts which include the writings of Nadine Gordimer (from South Africa) and el-Saadawi. Professor Klaver notes that the course

> focuses on contemporary women authors from around the world who have chosen to enter public discourse through both literary and more political modes of writing. The goals are to expose students to the passionate commitments of writers seeking to intervene in and reshape their worlds through different kinds of textual projects.[383]

This course clearly frames el-Saadawi's writing within a universalist frame of reference. It is striking how el-Saadawi is deployed here in a didactic sense. She is no longer an

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[383] http://www.English.syr.edu/faculty/Klaversyllabi/ETS192htm

Arab woman representing the faults of a static and oppressive culture, but an inspirational activist seen as being of value in politicizing US college students.

El-Saadawi's work is also included in the reading list for a course run by Dr. Martha Saavedra from the Women's Studies Department at the University of California. The course description, worth quoting at length, asks the following:

> Is it presumptuous to offer a course on the lives of approximately 380 million women in 53+ countries speaking 1000 or so languages who live halfway around the world from where we now sit? It may well be. Here will we do our best to sort out questions, biases, contradictions, theories, processes, representations and resources to gain at least a cursory understanding of the lives of one half of the population of whole continent. While a participant in the course may learn some interesting facts and figures, the goal will be to develop an analytical framework that allows one to ask more refined questions and to be clear on why the questions are even being asked.[384]

The reason I have quoted this at length is because it serves as a good example of the awareness amongst some Western feminists of the need to be culturally sensitive when looking at issues faced by non-Western women and because it reflects what I believe to be an increased awareness amongst academic feminists of the danger of bringing to bear prejudices, such as those reflected in Orientalism, to the process of looking at the lives of women in other parts of the world.[385]

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[384] Women's Lives Worldwide: African Women, University of California, Berkeley - Women's Studies. Dr. Martha Saavedra, Center for African Studies 2005

[385] There are plenty of other examples of global and feminist courses including el-Saadawi. For instance, "Introduction to Feminist Theory: Third World and Translational Feminisms" which includes *The Nawal el-Saadawi Reader* is currently run by Adrienne McCornmick at Women's Studies, at the State University of New York (Fredonia). http://www.fredonia.edu/womensstudies/ws301.html; The reading list of an introductory course to feminist thinkers and activists from a range of cultures run as part of the Women's

3.7.4.4 Style attractive to feminists

A number of critics have criticised el-Saadawi's writing style for a number of reasons, but a minority, however, have embraced it whole-heartedly, including in relation to works post *Women at Point Zero.* In other words, el-Saadawi's reception does have something to do with perceived stylistic merit, although this point should not be pushed too far, as we shall see.

Kirkus Review not only praises el-Saadawi's *Innocence of the Devil* as a "complex and chilling novel" but goes further to compare her linguistic and literary skills to that of Salman Rushdie:

> While more measured in tone than Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, Saadawi's novel is similar in its linguistic, literary, and philosophical richness. Evoking a world of pain and survival that may be unfamiliar to many readers, it speaks in a universal voice that reaches across cultures and is the author's most potent weapon.[386]

For a translated author to be compared to one of Britain's most widely read authors is undoubtedly a great marketing advantage.

Studies Programme at Massey University, US, entitled "Women of Ideas and Action", lists a number of el-Saadawi's works including *Memories from the Women's Prison, The Hidden Face of Eve, Woman at Point Zero, The Circling Song, Two Women in One , Death of an-Ex Minister and God Dies by the* Nile.Dr.lynne Alice 2005

[386] *Kirkus Review*, d.n.

The celebration of her literary excellence is also apparent in the reception of her latest work, *A Daughter of Isis,* which received literary acclaim from a number of literary critics. Commenting on the style of *The Nawal el Saadawi Reader* Nusrat Shaheen of the University of Manchester notes that "throughout Saadawi adopts a very accessible style of writing which succeeds in laying bare the complexities and intricacies of the global position of women."[387] Finally, linking her medical authority with her skills as a writer, Al-Hassan Golley argues that it is the authoritative knowledge of medicine that grants el-Saadawi an assertive style.[388] She concludes that this style has made Arab male critics uneasy about her work and that this style is "what made her special and differentiated [her] from other Arab feminists…Her assertiveness is manifested not only in her authoritative use of science and medical knowledge but also in feminist terms".[389]

3.7.4.5 Tolerance of Stylistic Weakness

This mostly feminist commentator notwithstanding, it should be admitted that the successful reception of el-Saadawi's works overall owes less to their perceived literary merit, and more to feminist and activist excitement about her message and her authenticity as a feminist activist from the Third World. We can see this especially where reservations about el-Saadawi's literary style are often made alongside

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[387] Nusrat Shaheen.*International Journal of Cultural Studies, review of The Nawal el Saadawi Reader, 137.*
[388] Al-Hassan Golley, 132.
[389] Ibid., 157.

expressions of admiration for her person and her voice. As Myriam Seleme-Carr, from the University of Salford, puts it:

> The popularity in translations of works by Nawal el Saadawi, including a number of works of fiction translated into English…undoubtedly owes more to admiration for her courage as an outspoken feminist than to the opinions of the literary critics.[390]

El-Saadawi's personal history, with the intense nature of the problems she faced with her government and religious institutions, coupled with the general need feminists had for anthropologically valuable material about Arab women's lives, seems at times to have compensated for what some critics believe to be her at times questionable literary merits. The outcome is that she now has a tolerant audience with a tolerant horizon of expectation in relation to her style, both amongst her critics and her readers.

Reactions to what some consider are her stylistic shortcomings illustrate this tolerance, and the real interests and concerns of reviewers. Although Hafez states that he does not consider el-Saadawi's writings to fall under the category of novel, he nonetheless concludes that when criticising her style we need to bear in mind her courage and the difficulties she faces as an outspoken woman in a conservative society. He claims feminism may explain her success in spite of the poverty of her artistic style.[391] Similarly, a reader commenting on her work on Amazon.com writes that her work is

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[390] France., 154.
[391] Hafez, Sabry. "Intentions and Realisation in the narratives of Nawal El Saadawi," *Third World Quarterly* 11, No. 3, July 1989.

out-dated and dull, but that her courage needs to be taken into consideration when assessing the merit of her writing.[392]

A vast number of examples illustrate that in spite of the artistic pitfalls some critics and reviewers of el-Saadawi's work may find, they seem to stress the point that it is el-Saadawi's ability to use literature to express women's oppression that makes her literature important, and that this compensates for her "repetitious" and "obvious" style. Of writing *Woman at Point Zero*, al-Ali states:

> Certain images, similes, and metaphors are used repetitiously – a strategy which, from an artistic point of view, appears to be too direct, too 'obvious', lacking subtlety. El Saadawi manages successfully, however, to convey women's suffering at the hands of men as well as women's struggles to overcome male oppression and to obtain selfhood."[393]

Likewise, in a review of *Woman at Point Zero* and *God Dies by the Nile*, Joel Beinin writes that these books:

> Are sometimes artistically flat, in the worst tradition of socialist realism, but that they cry out loudly against the prevalent gender and class oppression of contemporary Egypt at a time when few others have had the courage to raise their voices".[394]

It seems that the weight and unprecedented nature of her message have created a tolerance against conventions writing. Ellie Barta-Moran, writing of *Daughter Of Isis,*

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[392] Reader's review of *A Daughter of Isis: The Autobiography of Nawal El Saadawi*, by Nawal el-Saadawi. (Newton, MA United States http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1856496805/104-8907247-4290343?v=glance&n=283155

[393] al-Ali, 30.

[394] Joel Beinin. "Editor's Bookshelf" *Middle East Report* (July August 1988), 47.

states that "although the book could have done with an editor to deal with the occasional rambling prose, it is an insightful piece as it celebrates the family of Egypt's most interesting feminist".[395] Similarly, Chaners believes that "when she abandons jargon and speaks directly about issues of poverty, health and women's role in fundamentalist societies, her book sizzles".[396]

In other areas too, where commentators have reservations about el-Saadawi, they evoke tolerance on the basis of the imputed values and activism of the author. For example, in her latest work el-Saadawi is said by some to make generalisations that could be taken to undermine the value attached to her judgment. In her discussion of *My Travels Around the World,* Al-Hassan Golley criticises el-Saadawi for her self-assured notions and for her generalised description of life in countries she visited after she had become a public figure. However, Al-Hassan Golley remains reluctant to condemn el-Saadawi in an outright manner, as she believes that el-Saadawi does maintain a good degree of social awareness: "although I find this public persona which emerges in the last sections of the volumes less intriguing than the earlier more fluid and complex self, the goodwill is still there, as well as the compassionate concern for others."[397]

This tolerance is also reflected in some of the readers' reviews posted on Amazon.com. Sandra Zickefoose writes in relation to *Two Women in* One that:

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[395] Ellie Barta-Moran, "*A Daughter of Isis*",*Booklist, June 1, 1999,1.*
[396] *Business Information for Publishers Weekly* 1997
[397] Al-Hassan Golley, 179.

> This book was first published in 1975 by a brave woman who was willing to tell a story-and to tell truths that others from her country didn't want told-she has paid for her bravery with exile and that kind of commitment should not be belittled. I am sure this book was a groundbreaking, landmark work at the time it was first published-so it shouldn't be entirely dismissed-but in reality it is pretty dated and a bit of a bore to read. I almost stopped reading it and it is only 123 pages… Buy the book to support the author-she deserves praise--but don't buy the book because you are looking for a great read with new insights into another culture or some universal human dilemma –it's just not here".[398]

Similarly, another reader writes of *Memoirs form the Women's Prison* that:

> Although I like Sadaawi's feisty, rebellious spirit, I must say I was highly disappointed in her work! Her bland and simplistic writing style didn't' go well with me. The real significant drawback of this book is that it is written in an extremely narrow perspective! The whole book is about her and her memories, you don't even know what the other person is thinking".[399]

Again, some very serious reservations on grounds of style and perspective are tempered by reference to the imputed nature of the author's personality.

3.7.4.6 Feminist reactions in general to her post *Women at Point Zero* work

In addition to the above categories that reflect how the feminist reception of el-Saadawi's work can be located under certain themes, it is important to step back and observe how a number of reactions are more generally indicative of the shift that has taken place away from an Orientalist discourse. This shift falls squarely within the

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[398] Katonah, NY United States "*I just wanna be me--but who might that be?*", reader's review *My Travels Around the World,* by Nawal el-Saadawi, May 3, 2001.

[399] "Disappointment ////////////", reader's review of Memoirs form the Women's Prison, by Nawal el-Saadawi, July 10 2001. http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0520088883/104-8907247-4290343?v=glance&n=283155

analysis presented in chapter 2 (section 2.8) concerning the away in which feminist analysis and reception of Arab women's writing became more rich and subtle during the 1980s and 1990s.

The breadth of the topics that el-Saadawi deals with as feminist and a doctor is recognised by some commentators such as Jennifer Cohen, who covered a broad range of topics with her in an interview in the mid 1990s. Starting with *Memoirs of a Woman's Doctor*, Cohen looked at how el-Sadaawi's medical background had influenced her writing, and explored with her the connection between women's health and the metaphorical health of the world in terms of war and peace. Cohen put forward questions such as the following:

> Can you comment on the character's names in *Circling Song* and how the issues come together there between politics, sexuality and health? … For example, the character is transformed from female to male to female again, giving the sense that poverty is as oppressive for men as it is for women.[400]

Cohen also raised the traditional question of circumcision and the relationship between Islam and women's oppression. However, in contrast to the approach taken by many feminists in the past who, as we have seen above, implicitly distanced themselves from the topic through the way in which they addressed it, Cohen takes an approach that recognises that the topic of circumcision is but one example of the universal phenomenon of violence against women:

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[400] Jennifer Cohen "But Have Some Art with You: An Interview with Nawal el-Saadawi". *Literature and Medicine* 14.1 (1995) 60-71. http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/literature_and _medicine.

In *The Hidden Face of Eve*, you use the image of the hidden fact to talk about the secrecy that surrounds young girls who are abused. To us, this sounds very much like what we are discovering in the United States also, so Eve's face being hidden is not unique to your country. If this is a global problem, how can we treat it? Fighting together unites us.....There's another paradox you discuss in *The Hidden Face of Eve* that we'd like to ask you about. We see that within Islam there is both good and bad, while in this country we tend to oversimplify that religion. How do you see Islam in the context of women's struggle for freedom?"[401]

Similarly, in Katrina Payne's talk with el-Saadawi, Payne does not represent the works and views of el-Saadawi as a catalyst for reinforcing the notion of Islam as inherently hostile to women but rather looks at her work as a means to understanding the difference between Islam and Islamic fundamentalism. Starting by questioning whether Islam is "the great oppressor of women or just a convenient smokescreen?" Payne notes that

> fundamentalism is not a matter of religious observance. It is about the ways that political groups use and manipulate religion to win political power, or social control. It is this threat that el Saadawi has often focused on. And she is very clear that we must acknowledge how fundamentalism applies 'without exception' to all religions.[402]

Payne goes on to quote el-Saadawi's views on neo-colonialism and globalization, and the relationship of these concepts to fundamentalism. What Payne's article reflects is that although Islam remains in the spotlight for those who seek to accuse it of playing a fundamentally oppressive role towards women, some feminists address the issue as a question which gives room to the possibility of a nuanced and complex analysis by way

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[401] Ibid., 60.
[402] Katrina Payne. "Removing the veil" review of *The Nawal el Saadawi Reader, Sibyl* 3 (July- August 1998), 21-23.

of answer, rather than as a rhetorical question that leads to the traditional Orientalist answer.

Finally, it is apparent that the feminist platforms on which el-Saadawi reaches out to the Western reader has changed in nature from what was previously a literary-based and feminist-oriented issues-based platform, to become a more politically-oriented feminist platform. Some of her interviews in the 1990s, such as her 1991 interview with *Spare Rib*, have centred entirely on her political activism. [403] The interview largely focused on el-Saadawi's view of the First Gulf War and the efforts of the international feminist movement to stop the war. In the same manner, Maya Jaggi's *Guardian* Profile of el-Saadawi in 1991 looked closely at her participation in the International Women's Initiative for Peace in the Gulf. Jaggi quotes el-Saadawi's argument that "there are always setbacks to the liberation of women when imperialist powers are involved since they represent ultimate patriarchy."[404]

3.7.4 Limits on Feminism

As discussed above in relation to *Women At Point Zero,* a major shortcoming in the feminist reception of el-Saadawi has been the way in which it has failed to recognise and comment on her political contextualisation of the major feminist themes in her writing. This problem is still apparent, although to a lesser extent, in her more recent reception.

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[403] Marcel Farry. "Time to Come Together: In Conversation with Nawal el-Saadawi." *Spare Rib*, no. 221 (March 1991), 12- 15.
[404] Maya Jaggi, "Fighting talk". *The Guardian*, 26 February 1991

We can see this where feminists preferred to avoid difficult issues of Middle Eastern politics. For example, with reference to the political themes she addresses in the five works selected above, el-Saadawi recounts how she spoke at a women's conference in Kenya in the 1980s about political events and dynamics of the conflicts in Palestine and Iraq, the way in which those conflicts affected women, and how she subsequently met Betty Friedman, an American feminist, who accused her of "politicising the conference". In response, el-Saadawi wrote that she insisted that political realities affect women and that politics was therefore a theme that had to be addressed by feminists. [405]

A further interesting example of selectivity leading to the de-politicization of reactions to el-Saadawi's work is the way in which *Memoirs of Women's Prison* was translated. This simultaneously provides us with a good example of the role played by one of Lefevere's categories of expertise in adapting the work to the demands of the host literary culture. According to the translator of *Memoirs of Women's Prison,* Catherine Cobham stated that she did not need to consult el-Saadawi on anything when translating the book. Although she recognises that el-Saadawi's work is full of politics, she commented that she had complete liberty to omit some of the political aspects of the work. [406] The reason she gave for this was that the book was "too politically/sociologically slanted for something which purported to be a novel" and she admitted cutting down the number of rhetorical questions in it.[407] In simple terms, and

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[405] El-Sadaawi , *The Nawal el-Saadawi Reader.*
[406] Gollery, 148.
[407] ibid., 148.

for reasons which go beyond the merely stylistic, one might say that the less politics, the greater the likely success in reception.

The approach taken by Cobham might be argued to be vindicated by the support it has found in, for example, the view of Mukherjee Bharati (co-author of "Days and Nights in Calcutta") on the direct style of *God Dies by the Nile* and the impact of that style on the American reader. He notes that the writing is politically-motivated and that it expresses a total belief in the interaction between literature and politics. For him, this results in a "directness" of style, which he argues does not suit the American reader's horizon of expectation and "puts him/her off" el-Saadawi's work.[408]

Such reactions to el-Saadawi's political analysis reflect a demand by Western feminists of el-Saadawi to limit her role by staying away from macro issues such as politics and economics, and to focus more on the micro issues of specific feminist issues. Nikki Keddie, commenting on *Two Women in One* in the *New York Times Book Review*, concluded that the novel "is less overtly political and as a result she suggests a more universal message." [409]

I consider that there are two obvious explanations for Western feminists taking such an approach to her work. First, some American academics undoubtedly want to prevent the discussion of feminist issues from going near the thorny issue of Middle Eastern politics.

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[408] Mukherjee, "Betrayed by Blind Faith", 14.
[409] "Literature Resource Center,"
(http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/LitRC?c=2&ste=36&docNum=H1000029177&KA=Saad1/6/03

Second, it seems to reflect the desire to limit the discussion of Third World women's issues to a framework constructed on the basis of an assumption that culture is the main factor underpinning Arab women's oppression.

In summary, El-Saadawi's books deal with powerful feminist topics and themes, and analyse the broader socio-political and economic context of those themes in a particular Arab patriarchal society. A complete reading of her work would recognise this fact. By ignoring this context many feminists show not only the narrow nature of the vacuum they were seeking to fill but also, and more importantly for present purposes, that el-Saadawi writes in a way that enables such feminists to successfully separate the individual themes from the broader context without reducing, for them, the value of the work. This then surely is a testament to the way in which el-Saadawi has written her books and of the way in which she gives her translator the liberty to edit in a way that will please the Western feminist readerships' horizon of expectation, as much as it is evidence of the specific mind-frame of the feminist readership. I would therefore also argue that this may well be part for the reason of her success: her writing appealed to the more informed Arab or broad-minded Western feminist as well as to the more narrow perspective of the selective feminist and general reader.

3.8 Conclusion

In looking at el-Saadawi's success in the West between her breakthrough year of 1980 and the present day, I have sought to show the multi-faceted nature of the factors that

have contributed to the reception of her work. The traditional explanation of her success has been that Orientalist discourse amongst feminists, as well as non-feminist critics and reviewers of her work, guaranteed her an initial and subsequent readership in the West. I have argued that this explanation is over-simplistic: it may be part of the story but it is not the whole story.

In understanding the reception of any author in a foreign literary system, it is important to look at the ideological context of the host literary system, in other words the dominant form of conceptual patronage that will naturally form the basis of reception of any given book. In the case of a feminist text, that conceptual form of patronage is feminism. The core of my starting point is therefore that although Orientalism did indeed enter the reception discourse relating to el-Saadawi's work, particularly in the beginning, what should be noted is that her readership became predominantly feminist over time. As the years passed however, there was a gradual pulling back by feminists from using Orientalist discourse in relation to her work, and that this applied to both academic and non-academic readerships.

I have looked at the interaction between the role played in el-Saadawi's reception by two broad groups of factors: on the one hand factors that stood independent of el-Saadawi herself (Western feminism's development in the 1970s and the consequent knowledge vacuum relating to works of Third World women, the UN Conference and the issue of circumcision) and on the other hand factors relating to el-Saadawi herself (her involvement with the West in the 1970s, her credibility as a medical professional, her

powerful character and its denunciation of an Orientalist discourse amongst feminists attending the 1980 conference and the publication of her book in the same year). The interaction between these factors, in particular the perception of Western feminists that the striking figure of el-Saadawi could successfully help fill their knowledge vacuum, provides the basis for explaining her growing success through the 1980s. In addition, the factors identified as personal to her continued to be important throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

When looking at the circumstances of her reception in 1980 through the publication of her first book, it is key to understand that el-Saadawi's audience, even though largely feminist, was also in many ways an audience representing a form of feminism marked by Orientalism. This kind of marking became less prominent over time, but feminist interest remained strong even as it shed its Orientalism. In other words, there was a continuity in the sociology of the audience, even while the audience itself shifted its ideas and interests away from the 'Oriental'. This helps explain el-Saadawi's continued success, because there was no fundamental discontinuity among her audience, which continued to comprise of feminists, albeit less Orientalist feminists.

In order to chart the shifting reception of and reaction to her work, I have separated reactions to her works according to chronological order and according to the fact that the first two of her books to be translated into English found the most success in terms of sales. In looking at reactions to *The Hidden Face of Eve* I have concluded that the Orientalist discourse and analysis of which el-Saadawi accused feminists at the 1980

conference was indeed very much present. As feminists, those admirers thereby failed to overcome the cultural boundaries erected by Orientalist discourse when looking at the writings of a woman they already considered to have gained the status of the spokeswoman for Arab women. This however did not negatively affect el-Saadawi. On the contrary, it very much helped her to gain a foothold in the West as reviews of her work appealed to the Orientalist horizon of expectation of her Western admirers. Unwittingly, one might say, Orientalist audiences had allowed a woman seeking to address universal feminist issues into their midst. Turning to *Women at Point Zero*, I have looked at how the essentially feminist readerships' reaction to this book was again less 'Orientalised' than reactions to her first book. In other words, Orientalism still affected some reviewers and academic discourse but it did so to a lesser extent than in relation to *The Hidden Face of Eve*.

In looking at the nature of reactions to her work post *Women at Point Zero*, I have concluded that this continued support largely shed its Orientalist beginnings, primarily because of the academic feminist interest in her work that has ensured a sustained position for el-Saadawi in the Western literary system. The success of her earlier works was a crucial factor in her later success. They assured her permanent recognition amongst feminist academics and even in sources of reviews as varied as *The Guardian*, *The New York Times* and *The Kirkus Review*. I have argued that this recognition was further assisted by her force of personality and presence in the West. As a result, a number of publishers (including feminist publishers such as The *Women's Press* and Kali for Women an American academic publisher) concluded that some of her earlier

works written before the 1980s, in addition to her post *Women at Point Zero* writings, merited translation and extensive reviews. This support and her academic readership continued despite her other books not selling nearly as many copies as her first two to be published in English. Of course, this recognition has an important implication for my main argument. Even though feminism became more important over time in el-Saadawi's reception, it must be agreed that it was Orientalism, and a feminism tainted by Orientalism, that launched her career. My point has been to trace an important qualitative shift in the reception of el-Saadawi's work that has largely been missed by those too ready to apply a reductive Orientalist analysis.

Finally, my argument is not that the feminist response of el-Saadawi's reception meant that finally 'the West' had understood the message that el-Saadawi was trying to convey. This naïve admiration of Western feminism is not the intent of this analysis. Instead, in looking at feminist reactions, I have highlighted the fact that most reviewers and critics did not extensively engage with the political, economic and anti-imperialist themes which have also marked el-Saadawi's oeuvre. In short, feminist reactions were selective, in line with the presupposition of feminist discourse – namely, a tendency to evacuate politics and economy, and to focus too much on a narrow definition of gender.

Chapter 4 - Hanan al-Shaykh

4.1 Introduction

This chapter seeks to explain the factors behind the popularity of Hanan al-Shaykh's works in the Western literary system.[410] I begin with a brief introduction to the life and works of al-Shaykh (section 4.2). The rest of the chapter will consist of the six factors I argue have contributed to her success in the West. In so doing, I intend to show that study of al-Shaykh, like el-Saadawi, offers a good example of the multi-faceted nature of the factors involved in the reception of a foreign text in a literary system with differentiated patronage.

Through an analysis of reviews and critiques of al-Shaykh's work, I will analyse the extent to which the discourses and ideologies of Orientalism and Feminism were influential in her reception in the West. I argue that al-Shaykh's work has undoubtedly attracted an Orientalist discourse (section 4.3) as well as feminist support through her exploration of questions of femininity and social oppression (section 4.4) I will also make reference to the extent to which I believe feminism managed to steer wide of an Orientalist discourse when reviewing al-Shaykh's work. In so doing I will make clear that I do not believe that the extent to which it was or was not associated with Orientalist discourse had only great affect on the success of al-Shaykh's texts in the West. I will argue that to a large extent this is because her success can be related to four additional

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[410] Her work has been popular particularly n Britain, Europe and Australia.

factors: the topics of her writing, which brought her thematically close to other popular authors in the Anglophone literary world (section 4.5); a specific political context, which, following Jauss, can be considered to be an example of political factors affecting a readership's horizon of expectation – section 4.6); the role translators play in translating her work (section 4.7); and the social factor, as defined in Chapter II, of her residence in London and the way in which it facilitated the author's interaction with the media (section 4.8).

4.2 Review of al-Shaykh's life and writings

The purpose of this section is to review al-Shaykh's background and her major works in order to provide a backdrop relating to the themes she writes about and the personal context from which those themes arose, which can serve as a reference point when looking at reactions to her work .

4.2.1 General introductory comments on al-Shaykh and her writing

Hanan al-Shaykh is a prominent Lebanese writer who is seen in the West as one of the leading contemporary female writers of the Arab world. Born in 1945 to a *Shia'* family, al-Shaykh was brought up in Ras al-Naba, a conservative sector of Beirut. She was educated first in Almailiah traditional Muslim girls' school and then moved to a less disciplinarian Ahliya school.

In 1963 she moved to Cairo where she studied at the American College for Girls and where she wrote her first novel *Suicide of a Dead Man,* before going back to Beirut where she worked as a journalist for *Al-Hasna* women's magazine between 1966 and 1968, and for the *Al-Nahar Literary Supplement* between 1968 and 1975.

Leaving behind the civil war in Lebanon, she accompanied her husband to live in Saudi Arabia in 1976, where she produced her most celebrated novel *Women of Sand and Myrrh.*[411] Now part of the Lebanese Diaspora, she has lived in London since 1982.

Al-Shaykh has achieved major recognition in Western cultural circles. Her novels have long been taught as part of a large number of literature courses concerned with Middle Eastern Studies in general and her works have a significant presence in courses concerned with women's studies, particularly in the US. Her writings are also discussed in literary conferences and book clubs, in literary reviews, newspapers and literary journals. For example, *The Financial Times* described her as one of the finest Arab novelists of her generation.

Al-Shayk's had a varied cultural and cosmopolitan background: her upbringing in the conservative Shia' rural south of Lebanon, Beirut (a capital filled with political and cultural controversy) and her well-travelled life in Cairo, the Arabian Gulf and finally London has undoubtedly been a source of internal conflict. Her life has provided her

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[411] Hanan al-shaykh, *Women of sand and Myrrh*.Trans, trans. Catherine Cobham (London: Quartet, 1989).

with a wide-ranging perspective on conflicting social and religious attitudes and beliefs, particularly in respect of women's role and position in Arab society. She has deployed this perspective creatively, particularly in her earlier novels.

Her writings have caused great controversy in the Arab world,. Some of her books, such as *The Story of Zahra* and *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, were condemned by conservatives in the Arab world, particularly in the Gulf, for their overt expression of sexuality, and were denounced for portraying domestic sexual abuse and a negative image of the lives of Arab women. When asked in an American interview why she thought *The Story of Zahra* had been banned in the Gulf, al-Shaykh replied that critics in the Gulf rejected the book because they believed that "by its crudity, the novel gave a bad impression of the Arab family".[412]

4.2.2 Her novels and plays

Al-Shaykh has published a large number of works, many of which have been translated into English, French, Danish, German, Italian, Korean, Spanish, Polish and Hebrew. My review of her writing will concentrate on some of her novels published in English, with particular consideration given to those that have received the most attention in both the Western and the Arab literary scenes. I will look at them in chronological order of their

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[412] *The San Francisco Chronicle,* August.13, 1995.
http://voices.cla.umn.ed/v/Bios/entries/alshaykh_hanan.html

publication in English. The reviews and critiques these works have received will then be the focus of further analysis.

4.2.2.1 *The Story of Zahra*[413]

The Story of Zahra, generally recognised as her most powerful novel, constitutes the starting point in terms of her recognition by Western literary circles and established her name at "the forefront of modern Arabic literature".[414] This was her first long novel to be translated into English. Al-Shaykh's *The Persian Carpet,* a short story, had already been translated by David Jones and was published in 1983 in a collection of different authors' works, entitled *Arabic Short Stories.* According to al-Shaykh herself, this short story gained reasonably good reviews and facilitated subsequent translations of her work into English.

The manuscript was originally rejected by nine publishers in Beirut, then the centre of the Arab publishing world. This was because of the book's overt reference to sexuality, particularly to non-marital and auto-erotic sex, which was and remains a taboo subject in the Arab World. Al-Shaykh consequently published the book herself. It was translated into French in 1986 under the title *L'histoire de Zahra*, as part of a selection of novels selected to present Arab literary writings on the occasion of the opening of the Arab World Institute in Paris. Both *The Story of Zahra* and *Women of Sand and Myrrh*

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[413] Hana al-Shaykh, The story of Zahra. (London : Quartet Books), 1986.
Ḥikāyat Zahra. 2nd ed. Bayrūt: Dār al-ādāb, 1989.
[414] Zeidan, 470.

(discussed below) are required reading on courses and viewed as an exploration of the physical and spiritual existence of women.

The Story of Zahra's strong feminist theme is made up of an exposure of, rather than a rebellion against, Lebanese society's attitude towards women. Through the suppressed female voice of its protagonist, Zahra, it exposes forms of social oppression that affect the female psyche and the development of female identity in circumstances such as those described in the novel. It is not autobiographical, yet it contains details that are related to experiences taken from the author's life. For example, the electro-convulsive therapy that the protagonist goes through is a portrayal of a real experience of the author's cousin, who was subjected to the therapy after a secret love affair.[415] In addition, the context of the main theme – the plight of the central female character – is that of the Lebanese civil war, a monumental political "event", which I will later argue undoubtedly enhanced Western interest in the book.

The story's framework is made up of the narrative of the central character's life. As a young woman, her life is characterised by oppression and physical exploitation. Her attempt to find solitude with an uncle, whom she visits in Africa, leaves her disillusioned and pushes her to marry a man with whom she cannot communicate. At this stage of the novel the narration is interestingly shifted to a male narrator, her husband, a voice that condemns the Lebanese class system and questions various social attitudes society holds towards women, including the issue of virginity. By shifting the narration to a male

[415] Maya Jaggi, "Conflicts Unveiled," *The Guardian*, 7 July, 2001.

character, al-Shaykh succeeds in presenting both a female and male view on social oppression and its harmful effects on both genders. This helps al-Shaykh stand out from other Arab female writers who limit their narration to female characters.

The novel goes on to cover the Lebanese Civil War and its effect on family and societal principles, and through the protagonist Zahra we are once again confronted with various questions on the nature of war and sexuality.

Throughout the novel, al-Shaykh deems society at large accountable for the construction of oppressive values. Through the depiction of Zahra's troubled life, her attempt to come to terms with the various forms of oppression she suffers, the fact that she succeeds in temporarily controlling her mind and body, and through her transition from a passive into an active character within an environment of war in which social roles have collapsed, al-Shaykh mounts a strong challenge to the nature and value of social roles and conventions imposed upon women. On the other hand, Zahra's freedom results in her murder at the hand of the man with whom she is expecting a child and with whom she originally envisaged the possibility of a healthy future. Through this event, al-Shaykh implies that war, represented in symbolic form through Zahra's lover's profession as a sniper, as well as social rules do not and will not allow women the possibility of self-fulfilment.

4.2.2.2 *Women of Sand and Myrrh*[416]

Women of Sand and Myrrh remains officially banned in some Arab states due to its sexually explicit language and, more importantly, due to its exposure of life in the Gulf during the Gulf War 1991. In contrast, in the West, where it has to-date sold 21,000 copies and where it features on a number of courses on both Arabic literature in general and women's writing in particular, the novel has gained widespread recognition. Indeed, *Women of Sand and Myrrh* was chosen as one of the 50 Best Books of 1992 by Publishers Weekly.[417] Due to its powerful representation of the state of female emancipation, it is the novel amongst her works that has attracted the greatest amount of Western feminist interest and critique.

As with *The Story of Zahra*, the story is set in the powerful political context of the First Gulf War. The novel focuses on the lives of four women struggling against the limitations imposed by a patriarchal society in an unnamed Gulf state. The two characters from the country in question represent the two poles of its social spectrum. The disparity between these two characters lies not only in their financial status but also in their attitudes, their views of the role of women, their concepts of liberty and their expectations of life. The third character, a Lebanese woman, represents the face of the active and modern Arab woman who is shocked by the vast constraints imposed on

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[416] Hanan al-shaykh, *Women of sand and Myrrh*.Trans. Catherine Cobham (London: Quartet, 1989). *Misk al-ghazāl*. 2nd ed. Bayrūt: Dār al-ādāb, 1996.
[417] Review of Women of Sand and Myrrh, 13 7 1992. http://reviews.publishersweekly.com/bd.aspx?isbn=0385423586&pub=pw

women by the unnamed Gulf state and longs for her freedom back in Lebanon. Finally, an American female character, living as an expatriate in that state and representing the voice of the middle-aged American female, provides a means through which al-Shaykh can expose with sharp criticism the fascination that Arab men feel towards Western women. This character reflects on the different status she holds in the US as opposed to Gulf state in question:

> I was calling myself, asking if I was the same Suzanne or Susan who'd sat in Texas, a woman in a house like any other house, … because I sat at a type-writer, people looked at me with surprise and admiration on their faces… those people who went by my door, if they didn't long to come in, at least they thought about me.[418]

Set in a context that militates against women's self assertion, the four female characters' diverse social and cultural backgrounds and countries of origin allow al-Shaykh to provide an insight into numerous different experiences, attitudes and backgrounds of women who struggle for self fulfilment in various ways. It is a picture that includes lesbianism, a closed yet luxurious life, and, most important of all, it includes the conflict between the desire to change and the pervasive and oppressive habitual negativity in women's lives.

Many scholars have argued that al-Shaykh plays most on the stereotypical image of the Arab woman and thereby appeals to Orientalist demands. I will go further into this point in later sections.

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[418] Al-Shaykh. *Women of Sand and Myrrh,189.*

4.2.2.3 *Only in London*[419]

Only in London represents a shift in al-Shaykh's writing. I will argue that its successful publication by a major publishing house (Bloomsbury) is not due to a feminist or specific political interest in its theme, but rather due to its novelty in addressing the issues faced by the Arab diaspora in the West. Some argue, and I agree to at least some extent, that its theme and its content appeal to an Orientalist interest.

The novel explores both the issue of society's oppression of men and women, and the more significant theme of the search for identity and self-fulfilment through reference to the characters' personal and cultural backgrounds. What distinguishes this novel from others is the female protagonist (Lamis's) process of self-discovery within the framework of West-East relationships and the experience of the Arab Diaspora in the West (in this case in London).

Through Lamis's experience we are given a depiction of the difference between Western and eastern individuals' perceptions of life and of each other. Through her words, we are told that the English are only interested in an Arab who has lived through a horrific experience that has taken place within a remote, dangerous and troubled world (i.e. the Orient). For example, one of the English characters asks Lamis:

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[419] Hanan al-Shaykh, *Only in London*. Trans. Catherine Cobham (London: Bloomsbury, 2001) *'Innahā Landun ya 'azīzī*. 1 ed. Bayrūt: Dār al-ādāb, 2001..

'You're Iraqi. So you must have come to London to escape from Saddam's repression?' Lamis answered confidently. 'Actually I came to marry an Iraqi man who was living here"'. With one sentence she had extinguished the expectation in the man's eyes. Nodding his head, he said, "Ahh" So he'd decided that because she's come to London in what he deemed normal circumstances she wasn't worth spending time on...[420]

Al-Shaykh's choice of theme in this novel has drawn criticism from both Arab and Western critics. Arab critics writing in the Arab world object to the overt treatment of sexuality, a taboo in the Arab world. Writers in the West, on the other hand, fear that the novel can be manipulated by Orientalist discourse. Sabry Hafez, for example, fears the novel "confirms Orientalist views of the Arab" rather than changing them.[421]

4.2.2.4 *Suicide of a Dead Man*

Suicide of a Dead Man avoids overt criticism of the ill-treatment of women by society. As with all al-Shaykh's novels written before 1987, this book was not translated into English until after *The Story of Zahra* had appeared in English.

Suicide of a Dead Man tends not to be mentioned when the translation of her works is discussed in the West, in spite of the fact that it is in this novel that she first experimented with the unique style of writing that she develops in most of her later

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[420] Al-shaykh, *Only in London*, 153.
[421] Jaggi, " Conflicts unveiled".

novels. Her narrative style permits her to avoid overt criticism of the ill-treatment of women by society and achieves "a subtle deconstruction of the ethos of patriarchy".[422]

No explicit judgment is expressed in the text about the ill-treatment of women by patriarchal societies. The reader is left to draw his or her own conclusion on the basis of the story's events. As Zeidan states, she "dislodges the patriarchal system without ostensibly challenging it".[423] Al-Shaykh's challenge to the patriarchal system is not maintained through the voice of a female narrator, but more effectively through the narrative of the male protagonist. Her criticism of the Lebanese patriarchal system is presented through a narrative in which the male protagonist's beliefs and attitude towards women and their social roles serve as an exposition of the society's perspective in general.

4.2.2.5 *Praying Mantis*

In *Praying Mantis,* al-Shaykh deals with the theme of the female search for the self, liberty and fulfilment within the cultural and religious setting of the southern Lebanese community from which she comes.

Al-Shaykh states that she has written the novel in an attempt "to make peace with the way (she) rebelled against (her) father" and expresses a concern over the possibility of

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[422] Zeidan, 470.
[423] Ibid., 470.

translating this novel:[424] as the novel deals with a girl struggling with life due to her religious upbringing, al-Shaykh says that she believes that the book "would be used against Islam", adding that it is "not meant as an attack on religion".[425]

These statements reflect al-Shaykh's awareness of the Orientalist nature of Western interest in Arab women's novels (set out in the previous two chapters), which she believes can serve to reinforce pre-conceived images of Islam's harsh treatment of women. I will argue that her novels were indeed used to reinforce such pre-conceived images and that this form of interpretation of her work in large part explains her success.

Al-Shaykh has also written two plays, both commissioned by the Hampstead Theatre: *Dark Afternoon Tea* (1995) and *Paper Husband* (1997).[426] According to her translator Catherine Cobham, the Theatre's interest in commissioning her work is a result of al-Shaykh's "ability to write witty, moving dialogue and create character in the theatre, rather than for anything to do with her portrayal of women or women's issues"[427]Although Cobham agrees with my suggestion that interest in al-Shaykh's work is usually expressed through a feminist angle or anthropological dimension, Cobham places a major emphasis on the fact that al-Shaykh's style and literary technique are of high quality and need to be taken more seriously.[428] She is keen to assert that al-

[424] Hanan al-Shaykh, interview by author, 23 July 2001, London.
[425] Ibid.
[426] Performed by Hampstead Theatre.
[427] Catherine Cobham, private correspondence. April, 2002.
[428] Ibid.

Shaykh's stylistic excellence is rarely addressed in media reviews or indeed in scholarly courses that include al-Shayk's works on their reading list.[429]

4.3 Orientalism as a factor in the reception of al-Shaykh's work

Chapter II located Orientalism as a form of ideological patronage that affects the poetics of Western literary systems (i.e. the ideological framework of a given literary system). Following Lefevere's analysis, it also affects the categories of expertise he identifies as constituting the second element of his control factor. As we have seen, these categories include reviewers and, in looking closely at their work geared at the readership, I will once again reflect on the importance of the role that they play in moulding and reinforcing the nature of a literary system in line with preconceived and well-established ideological categories and discourses.

In addition, Chapter II located Orientalism as a discourse affecting the reader's horizon of expectation and response to a given literary work. As in chapter III, I argue that this general Orientalist mindset which many Western readers acquire through the general Orientalist discourse in Western society was tapped into and reinforced by literary reviewers. It was then popularised by the mass media and consequently accounts for much of al-Shaykh's popularity. This section will therefore turn to evidence, in the form of reviews, which supports the argument that Orientalism affected the success of al-Shaykh's reception in Western literary systems by playing the role ascribed to it, as

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[429] Ibid.

outlined above. It will also address the question of whether al-Shaykh consciously adapts her writing to the Orientalist discourse and thereby facilitates this process.

4.3.1 Orientalist reviews of work

To what extent then, do al-Shaykh's themes and her presentation of the lives of Arab women lend themselves to the Orientalists' enduring stereotype? I will argue that, as with el-Saadawi, the themes al-Shaykh addresses clearly lend themselves to Orientalist discourse and that when looking at Western literary reviews of al-Shaykh's work, an Orientalist undertone becomes immediately apparent.

Reviews and articles covering al-Shaykh's writing and which are published in non-academic outlets extensively employ the imagery of the hidden, exotic and the unknown. Heavy use is made of terms such as "harem" and "struggle", and images such as of the desert as a cage. By way of example, *Rocky Mountain News* praises al-Shaykh's *Women of Sand and Myrrh* because it "affords the reader a glimpse into a world rarely seen by the West".[430] *The Denver Post* opines that "her books are full of the struggle of Arab women to become individuals in a culture that does not value them as humans".[431] In this sense, many reviews of *Women of Sand and Myrrh* lead the reader to believe that the

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[430] Judith Atwater, "A Muslim Woman's Powerful Story and a Search for Self," *Rocky Mountain News*, 27 March 1994 (71).
[431] Maureen Harrington, "Veil Lifted to Reveal Unimaginable World of Arab Women," *Denvor Post, 13 February,* 1994. 1.

novel represents a modern harem, which portrays women as oppressed second class citizens.

This Orientalist imagery pervades discussion of her work in reviews to such an extent that al-Shaykh herself has used it in commenting on her own work. In *The Denver Post* al-Shaykh refers to *The Story of Zahra* and *Women of Sand and Myrrh* as works in which she lifts "the very heavy veil from the Arab woman".[432]

This reinforcement of the stereotypical Western imagery of the Arab world through an Orientalist interpretation of al-Shaykh's writing is widely believed to have contributed to her success in the West. Dallal quotes various commentaries from literary reviews celebrating the work of al-Shaykh's *The Story of Zahra* as a creative representation of what it means to be a woman living in a traditional Middle Eastern society and arguing that those representations are negative in tone.[433] She notes that the commentary on the jacket of the novel promises that the novel will offer a "rare glimpse into the lives of Arab women in the Middle East, that still-closed society".[434] She further argues that al-Shaykh's portrayal of the hardship of Arab women is at the centre of Western reviewers' coverage of her work. Again quoting from the jacket, she points out that the publishers maintain that al-Shaykh "lays bare the unusual and highly charged relations that necessarily exist in a state that denies women their humanity".[435]

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[432] *Harrington,* "Veil Lifted to Reveal Unimaginable World of Arab Women", *1.*
[433] Dallal, "The Islamic World", 1.
[434] Al-Shaykh, *The Story of Zahra..*
[435] Hanan al-Shaykh "*Only in London,*" review of *Only in London,* by Claudia Pugh-Thomas. *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 July 2001, (21).

4.3.2 Adapting her work for Orientalist review

On the surface it is possible to argue that al-Shaykh adapts her writing to facilitate an Orientalist interpretation of her work and that the text itself, in addition to the reviews, purposefully create Western hegemonic perceptions. As summarised above, *Women of Sand and Myrrh* deals with the following themes: women's sexuality and the specific topic of lesbianism, the interaction between Arab men and Western women, and the tension between individual women's desire for change in their personal lives and the oppressive nature of Arab society. One of the main themes of *The Story of Zahra* concerns the oppression of the female figure in Arab society. Such themes are strongly reminiscent of the Orientalists' presentation of the sensual, negative and unbounded sexual Orient. So does this mean al-Shaykh is playing to Orientalist themes?

This would not be a new argument. The translation and publication of Arab novels remains with some exceptions limited to independent publishers. Scholars have claimed that Arab women novelists have tailored their work to conform to Western literary markets' demands in order to gain access to them. As Amireh demonstrates, this has included practices such as dropping the focus from the main theme of the novel and concentrating instead on what may appeal to the preconceptions of Western audiences. In her discussion of the 1987 King Penguin Edition of Fadia Faqir's *Nisanit*, Amireh reflects on the role of the book's cover in exploiting the sense of "Third World difference" between the women readers and protagonists. These covers are often dominated by features such as the desert or traditionally-veiled Arab women. *Nisanit* a

highly political novel on the Arab-Israeli conflict, seen largely through a female protagonist, but we see that its content is belied by a cover which seeks simply to appeal to a pre-conceived image of Arab womanhood.[436]

Al-Shaykh's individual characters could be taken to conform to Western notions of the exotic. An example could be Tamr's grandmother in *Women of Sand and Myrrh.* The story surrounding this character is a stereotypical tale of Arab women's misfortune. As a young woman the grandmother marries a Saudi Sheikh and lives among the exotic harem. Her failure to conceive leads to rejection and divorce. The description of the stranger who helps her and the other women in the harem to cover up the Sheikh's impotence is evocative of Orientalist fantasies and the familiar atmosphere of *A Thousand and One Nights.*

Dallal argues that *Women of Sand and Myrrh* is intentionally written to be translated. In commenting on the first chapter, she notes that "references specific to Western cultures, which would be unfamiliar to Arabs, go unexplained", giving the examples of al-Shaykh using the terms "Barbie dolls and Snoopies". [437] However, in an interview conducted for the purpose of this study[438] al-Shaykh stated that in that it was not necessary to explain these terms to the Arab audience because in her view Arabs are familiar with them, a point with which I agree. She argues that she wrote *Women of Sand and Myrrh* before she had her breakthrough into the English market with the translation of *The Story of*

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[436] Amireh, "Publishing in the West", 4.
[437] Dallal, 'The Islamic World", 2.
[438] Hanan al-Shaykh, interview by author, 23 July 2001, London.

Zahra and that this was evidence that she could not possibly have been pandering to the demands of Orientalist reviewers.

In my view, Dallal's assessment does not do justice to the sophistication of al Shaykh's oeuvre. Given that Orientalism and feminism both address the same topic of women's sexuality, it can just as easily be argued that what all al-Shakyh is doing is addressing the topic of Arab women's political and sexual emancipation. Such an interpretation can be supported by an analysis of the feminist scholastic critique of her work, which I will turn to below.

With that in mind, I would argue that the existence of Orientalist reviews cannot be taken as *prima facie* evidence of al-Shaykh playing to those reviews in her writing. Rather it could be argued that some reviews are Orientalist in nature because al-Shaykh's characters are *Arab* women, rather than any other women, and that this is hijacked by Orientalist commentators to help make the work more attractive to a Western readership.

4.4 Feminism as a factor in the reception of al-Shaykh's work

As discussed in chapter II, feminist interest in Third World literature in general created a literary vacuum which opened an opportunity for Arab women's writing to penetrate the literary market. The vacuum was noted by publishers (members of Lefevere's category

of patronage) who seized upon the opportunity and decided to back Arab female writing which, as in the case of el-Saadawi, benefited al-Shakyk's work.[439]

4.4.1 The two main factors attracting feminists to al-Shaykh's work

Although al-Shaykh does not call herself a feminist, her work is embraced by many as feminist writing, and is adopted by some to be honorary "feminist novels" in the sense that her writings "deal not so much with the milieu of contemporary feminism as with charting the experience of women's oppression".[440] I would argue that there are two specific factors that can help to explain feminist interest in her work. These are the prominent feminist protagonists in her works, and al-Shaykh's use of the first person narration.

With reference to the first factor, many of al-Shaykh's characters can be identified with what I would call typical "feminist protagonists". In contrast to the typical Orientalist portrayal of Arab women's lives as being steeped in oppressive habitual negativity, al-Shaykh's female characters try to seize and shape their own destiny. The main protagonist in *Beirut Blues* is an educated woman named Asmahan who, despite the civil war, resists leaving her home country, thereby displaying a highly developed form of political consciousness. Moreover, Asmahan's vanity and longing for male [sexual]

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[439] This success is not confined to the Anglo-American literary system but exists also in Germany. In *The Migration Of Texts* (2000), 39. Aboud argues that the interest in translating the work of al-Shaykh and other women writers into German is related to the German feminist solidarity movement with Arab women. 'abdu 'abūd, *Ḥijrat al- nuṣūs* (Dimashq:Manshūrāt itiḥād al- kutāb, 1995).

[440] E, Showlater. *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory* (New York: Panthon Books, 1986), 231.

attention shows her to be a woman with real needs and desires of which she is herself conscious, and this is unusual for the Arab woman to whom we are accustomed. Tamr, the protagonist in *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, is a character who resists the decisions made for her. Empowered by the realisation that she can be liberated through her own education, she attempts to escape the male domination which controls her domestic and social circumstances. Her idea of achieving self-empowerment through refusing to be a sexual commodity and to undertake the traditional role of child-bearer contrasts sharply with the experiences of her mother and grandmother, and thereby presents to the reader an inter-generational contrast in order to illustrate the emancipation of the new generation. In addition, the variety of characters which al-Shaykh employs in her narrative not only lends merit to her work, but also more importantly "reflects the degree of sophistication in the author's feminist vision".[441]

This sophistication has been noted by the Western media in which many voices review al-Shaykh's novel *Women of Sand and Myrrh* as a rich and enjoyable work that provides a perspective on new dimensions of Arab women's lives. The novel, and specifically the way in which it provides a challenging perspective into the lives of Arab women, is deemed to be of particular importance by *The San Francisco Chronicle*. The journal praises *The Story of Zahra as* "a work of enormous grace and grandeur that is sure to change any simple preconceptions about the Muslim women of today".[442] Similarly, *The Voice Literary Supplement* sees that her work resists engaging in simplistic

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[441] Sabry Hafez in *Contemporary World Writers*, Ed, by Tracy Chevalier, 1993
[442] *The San Francisco Chronicle,* 13 August 1995.
http://voices.cla.umn.edu/vg/Bios/entries/alshaykh_hanan.html

interpretations about women and more particularly about Arab women.[443] In al-Shaykh's case the crucial point here is that her work enables her to challenge these stereotypes. Perhaps the most important acknowledgment of al-Shaykh's audacious and challenging writing is Edward Said's view of *Women of Sand and Myrrh*. Said writes that "far from simple romance, *Women of Sand of Myrrh* is both breathtakingly frank and technically difficult, taking on experiences as homosexuality and patriarchy with unexpected power."[444]

It is not only the narrative effect of striking female protagonists that has attracted the attention of Western feminists but also the context in which much of that narrative is set, namely, war and the way in which the characters use that heavily patriarchal context as a tool for their own emancipation. Feminist writers such as Cooke are interested in focusing on female writers' depiction of war because this has traditionally been a male domain of writing, and arguably it is their interest in al-Shaykh's use of the theme of war in her work that is the clearest example of feminist interest in al-Shaykh's oeuvre not being dominant by Orientalism. As Cooke points out, "recording women's presence and engagement at the war's front is crucial in order to counteract some of the distortions that have always been necessary to construct the age-old story of war as men's business".[445] In *The Story of Zahra* the protagonist demonstrates an attempt to use power to divert the actions of evil through her intimate relationship with a sniper. But the transformative power of this relationship is limited. Whilst she makes at least some

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[443] *The Voice Literary Supplement*, June 1991
[444] Edward Said "Embargood Literature," *The Nation,* 17 September 1990, (280).
[445] Miriam Cooke, *Gendering War Talk* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 178.

human connection to the sniper, she cannot distract him from violence.[446] Thus he is turned into "the pirate of that ship sunken among the war's contradictions."[447]

As far as the reception of *The Story of Zahra* is concerned, the largely Western commentaries relating to it reveal a great admiration for her ability to portray a vivid, true image of suffering in wartime. In seeking to explain the success of and high regard for this particular novel, both the theme of the Lebanese civil war and the more general theme of women's oppression in Lebanon are equally important. In *Boston Sunday Globe* the novel is described as "an original, moving and powerfully written novel, illuminating the personal human tragedy of war".[448] Al-Shaykh's portrayal of the political and religious dimensions of war and the war's effect on the mentality and virtues of society, her stark criticism of social oppression and its effect on women's psyche and identity, and her criticism of Lebanese society's class and religious division lead Zeidan to consider that *The Story of Zahra* is "the most impressive work in the history of Arab women's novels".[449]

A second aspect of al-Shaykh's work that has appealed to Western feminists is related to the use of the first person narrative. As the feminist critic Sunderman has remarked, the

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[446] *The Story of Zara* generally gained a vast feminist attention in texts that focused on the wartime context of its protagonist, for example in *Sexuality and War: Literary Masks of The Middle East in Lebanon*, Evelyn Accad 1990 and *In War's Other Voices: Women Writers on the Lebanese Civil War.* Miriam Cooke. 1988

[447] Cooke, *Gendering War Talk*, 178.

[448] *Boston Sunday Globe,* d.n.

[449] Zeidan, 191.

act of authorship itself is a breakthrough in patriarchal society.[450] Through the applied first person narrative technique, women are given the chance to tell their side of the story, of the violence they endure and the way they counteract it and thereby provide access to their perspectives of culture. As argued above in chapter II, this is in line with feminism's general preference for a methodology that places the first hand evidence of the individual woman at the heart of all broader conclusions. This form of narration presents a category of women different to that presented through male authors' writings, challenging what Sunderman sees as "the tradition of male authors making women the repository of inadmissible male desire".[451] And for Hafez "it is this struggle to articulate the woman's voice that earns al-Shaykh's novels a prominent place in feminist discourse."[452]

Sunderman emphasises the fact that al-Shaykh generally creates a world in which the characters speak for themselves, thus offering a chance for the woman's voice to be heard. In her critique of *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, she notes that "by telling women's side of the story, [the Lebanese female character] Suha's narrative functions as a witness to not only speak for those who are currently mute but also to give them the courage to find their own voices".[453]

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[450] Paula W. Sunderman, "Gender,Violence and Sexuality: Female Narrators in *Women of Sand & Myrrh*," *Phoebe* 5, no.1 (Spring 1993) 37.
[451] ibid. , 37.
[452] Hafez, 470.
[453] Sunderman, 40.

Similarly, in *Contemporary World Writers* Hafez acclaims al-Shaykh's skilful presentation of women's experiences in their struggle to break out of forms of social imprisonment:

> The elaborate network of first-person narrative, in which the text allows the four women to speak in turn giving voice to the voiceless, reflects in its structure the compartmentalization of women and their struggle to break out of all forms of social confinement. The very structure of the novel in which each section conveys a sense of independence while at the same time being an integral part of the whole reflects the degree of sophistication in the authors' feminist vision.[454]

4.5 Genres of al-Shaykh's writings as a factor in her reception

It is by identifying the major themes of a translated novel and by comparing them with the themes dominant in the target culture that one can develop a greater understanding of the factors that enhance the reception of foreign writers in general and of al-Shaykh in particular.

Critics have argued that the commercial success of women-centred novels is generally due to the fact they "correspond more closely to the structures of popular fiction" in terms of the mode of writing and the themes addressed, "rather than satisfying the incipient feminism of the population".[455]

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[454] Hafez, 471. The novel received further attention in a PhD thesis (Elizabeth Mckee, SOAS 1994), in which Mckee draws attention to the style of the novel in relation to her topic "Triangular Desire and Narrative Structure in the Novels of Levantine Women Writers" (1958-1991).
[455] Barry Coward, *Target Battleship* (London: Kimber, 1986), 232.

As we saw in chapter II, if a translated text that is seeking access to a different literary system constitutes a new type of genre or style, reviewers and/or academics may try to facilitate access for that work by comparing it to the closest genre prevalent in the host literary system. On the subject of al-Shaykh's writings in general, Accad writes:

> Her style is probably the most sensual of Arab women writers, with sensitivity and an inner tone so far unequalled, she has managed to bring out a voice that is original and vibrant. … The delicacy of her images and the lace-like of her descriptions are reminiscent of the French woman writer Chantal Chawar.[456]

In comparing el-Shaykh's style to that of a French feminist, Accad is clearly trying to bring the translated author closer to the host culture's readership by creating such a sense of familiarity. Whether or not this is an accurate understanding of Accad's view of al-Shaykh's writing and the need to familiarise readers with her work through a comparison to feminism, I will argue that al-Shaykh's work can be compared to two modes of Western writing and themes in particular: the confessional novel and the diaspora novel.

The Story of Zahra falls within a dominant trend in popular fiction, the confessional novel. The reader's horizon of expectation is in this sense set by the genre of the confessional novel. A major characteristic of this type of novel is that its structure and the most significant events of its narrative revolve around the voice of a principal

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[456] Evelyne Accad, *Sexuality and War: Literary Masks of the Middle East* (New York and London: New York University Press. 1990), 45.

protagonist describing her or his life.[457] Through the narration of her life experience and sexuality and through living "the experience of the adolescence and young adulthood … almost synonymous with the sexual experience"[458], Zahra, the main protagonist, fulfils the criterion on the confessional novel.

Coward asserts that preoccupation with sexuality in general is an integral part of the [Western] culture. Similarly, Foucault maintains that preoccupation with sexuality in general has been an integral part of Western culture. As such sexuality has been a major theme in fiction, has received extensive critique and is regarded as an effective marketing tool. Al-Shaykh's novels deal with sexuality in its various forms. In *The Story of Zahra* she deals with the question of sexuality in relation to war and as a means of liberation. In *Women of Sand and Myrrh* and *Only in London* the sexual experience is seen as a means of empowerment and self-discovery. When asked about sexuality in her writing, al-Shaykh said: "I feel Arab women are so bottled up that when it comes to sex they are releasing so many things in their personalities."[459]

Al-Shaykh's membership of another increasingly popular genre, namely diaspora literature, enhances her translatability even further. The heightened profile of this genre is illustrated in the existence of the 2002 'Diaspora City Writing Competition' held by London Arts Board. Similarly, the Bath Literature Festival (2002) presented al-Shaykh

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[457] Coward, 232.
[458] Ibid., 233.
[459] Jaggi, "Conflicts unveiled", 1.

together with other writers who discussed the influence of émigrés and their experiences of life in the Diaspora.

Diaspora literature addresses two themes: firstly, the dilemma of emigrants longing to return to their homeland and ending up living unhappily caught between two countries; and secondly, the problems posed by cultural interaction on a personal level, illuminating the confusion Arab women may face when they attempt to integrate into Western society. Perhaps it is this second problem that has provided al-Shaykh with an even wider audience in the West as it is of interest not only to those interested in other cultures, for whatever reason, but also to the large number of second generation immigrants who can find in translated literature an insight into the thoughts, lives and experiences of those with whom they may empathise.

Al-Shaykh herself seems to be aware of this market. When commenting on *Only in London*, she asserts that although the character Lamis, one of the main protagonists, might be alienating for Arabs in the Arab world, it is fully appreciated, and even identified with, by Arabs living in the West:

> There is an abyss between the Arabs in the Arab world and those in Europe…The Arabs in Europe could identify with the novel and found it very authentic. But some people in the Arab world don't want to know how certain Arabs in London live.[460]

[460] Quoted in Susannah Tarbbush, *The International Magazine on Arab Affairs,* no 45, September 2001.

4.6 Political factors in the reception of al-Shaykh's work

As set out in chapter II, Seger's notion of a socio-cultural horizon of expectation included the notion that political events could have a significant influence on a reader's interest in, and reception of, a piece of writing. In response to my question on whether political events can lead to an increase in readers' interest in foreign texts, Julian Hose of Zed Books stated that the invasion of Afghanistan has resulted in a sudden interest in the area and that consequently Ahmad's book on the Taliban became Zed Books bestseller, even though it had previously attracted only limited interest.[461]

By way of general introductory comment, it is notable that the works of al-Shaykh and other Arab female authors such as Khalifa, can be found at the online library of the University of Washington under the title "Crisis in Context: discovering Arabic fiction".[462] The events of 9/11 have generally had the effect of reawakening the West's interest in Arab culture and helped academic interest in the Arab novel to increase. In the academic sphere this interest can be seen as "part of an interest in developing deeper knowledge of Arab culture.... and to examine the cultural relationships between East and West.[463] Examples of such an interest include the conference at Old Dominion

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[461] Interview with the author, summer 2005.

[462] "The University of Washington Libraries Information Gateway": www.aites@u.washington.edu, last modified on Monday December 17.2001

[463] At a recent conference, entitled Arab Voices in the Diaspora, held in July 2002 at Leeds University, I addressed one of the speakers as to the extent to which political events affect Western interest in the Arab world, bearing in mind that such interest is believed to be either non-existent or constrained within Orientals discourse. Margaret Obank, the editor of *Banipal* - a magazine concerned with the diffusion of Arabic literature in the UK - answered that following 9/11, a number of Canadian publishing companies

University entitled "A Syllabus for Intercultural Communication"[464] and Georgetown University's symposium entitled "The Arab Novel: Visions of Social Reality".[465]

The Western publishing industry is also observing a subtle change in the attitude of the American market in particular. In an article entitled "The view from Britain - industry insiders comment on the effects of the September 11 attacks", Publishing Director of Penguin UK Juliet Annan notes that "Americans are keen to shed their insularity and are looking outside the US for the first time".[466]

Further evidence of this renewed Western interest in the Orient can be found in the remark of Richard Beswick, Editorial Director at Abacus (Little Brown): "We've realised that isolation is dangerous - so it would be nice to think that there'll be more interest in, for example, authors and stories form the Arab world."[467] He goes on to note that "Little Brown is publishing *My Forbidden Face*, a gripping and revealing account of life under the Taliban by a young Afghan woman, and it would be good to see bookshops supporting more novels like Hanan al-Shaykh's *Only in London*."

9/11 and the First Gulf War are both significant contemporary political events that are relevant to the West's reception of al-Shayhk's work. In an interview with al-Shaykh,

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had been in contact with her to request a recommendation of Muslim and Arab writers in order to introduce them to the Canadian reading public.

[464] Taught by Frances J. Hassencahl, 7.6.1998 revised..

[465] The Arab Novel: Visions of Social Reality, Center for Contemporary Arab Studies. Georgetown University. April 12-14, 2002.

[466] Juliet Annan. "The view from Britain" *The Guardian*, 29 December 2001.

[467] ibid.

she asserted that it was the events of the First Gulf War that initially created the conditions for her popularity in the US.[468] As a result of that conflict, people in the US started to show an interest in Arab culture and consequently *Women of Sand and Myrrh* received a large audience. *The Denver Post* has said of the novel that it "*Women of Sand and Myrrh* would prepare most of us for the Gulf in a way that no history, political commentary or cultural analysis could".[469]

In an interview I conducted with al-Shaykh, she noted that she thought that cultural and political factors could explain why publishers chose *The Story of Zahra* for translation. She explained that a novel written by a *Shia'* woman married to a Christian and writing about the Lebanese civil war would naturally draw great attention at a time when the Lebanese Civil War and relations with Iran dominated the French media.[470] *The Story of Zahra* was presented to the American audience as a work of sensuality providing valuable insight into life in Beirut. According to *Publishers Weekly*, "this rich tale mesmerized [readers] with its frank sexuality and scenes of war-torn Beirut".[471]

The publisher describes the novel as "haunting and erotically charged" and with reference to the *Shia'* background of the protagonist it states that "this vividly imagined

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[468] Hanan al-Shaykh, interview by author, 23 July 2001, London.
[469] *The Denver Post*, d.n.
[470] Hanan al-Shaykh, interview by author, 23 July 2001, London.
[471] http://voices.cla.umn.edu/vg/Bios/entries/alshaykh_hanan.html

and gripping portrayal of a contemporary woman's life in war-torn Beirut is certain to considerably expand her readership in the US."[472]

The Lebanese Civil War was also the context in which *Beirut Blues* is set, a novel which was taken by reviewers to be worthy of citation both on account of its stylistic eloquence and its insight into the reality of the Lebanese Civil War. In "The Arab-American Online Community Centre"[473], the reviewer of this novel writes that: "in Beirut Blues, Hanan al-Shaykh evokes a Beirut that has been seen by few, and that will never be seen again". *Kirkus Review* opines that the novel is "a finely wrought epistolary novel of lament and loss that mourns the fate of a beloved city… Lovely measured writing from a voice deserving to be heard.[474] The review that most drew attention to the novel's political dimension appeared in *The Philadephia Inquirer,* which wrote that "like the best modern political novels, *Beirut Blues* is not a political statement: fingers are not pointed without understanding. Hanan al-Shaykh's vision is unbelieving and yet full of faith."[475]

4.7 The roles of translators and academics

Chapter II referred to the role played by different categories of expertise in Lefevere's system of patronage. Both Al-Shaykh's translator, Catherine Cobham, and academia's embracing of her work on academic reading lists have contributed to her success.

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[472] Publisher quoted in review of *The Story of Zahra* posted on www.amazon.com
[473] www.cafearabica.com (Friday, 29 June 2001)
[474] ibid.
[475] ibid

4.7.1 The Role of the Translator

The successful introduction of a text into a foreign literary system involving a different language cannot be achieved without a competent translator.[476] The need for translators to acquire an adequate understanding of the problems involved in translating any text into English, and the technical skills necessary to overcome these problems, is essential for any foreign literary work to successfully enter the Western literary system. Concerning the process of translating Arabic into English, Zelfa Hourani notes that there are stylistic differences that need to be addressed. For instance, "in the Arab world, repetition is acceptable, but not in the English speaking world".[477] In addition, cultural references are even greater obstacles to overcome when translating from a language coming from such a different culture into English.

Al-Shaykh gives her translator complete liberty in solving any problems arising from cultural or stylistic differences between the source, target texts and cultures. In an answer to my enquiries on this issue, al-Shaykh said that sometimes when Cobham referred to a concept that might sound culturally vague to an English reader, al-Shaykh would explain to her in narrative style what she is seeking to convey and then Cobham would put it in a form that would be acceptable to the reader. In *Women of Sand and*

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[476] Of course debates rage about the exact meaning of competence in the world of translation, although it is beyond the scope of this thesis to pursue the issue in any detail here.
[477]Margaret Obank, "Short stories by men a kiss of death," interview with Zelfa Hourani, *Banipal*, no.2. (June 1998): 78.

Myrrh, Cobham opts to add an explanatory sentence to clarify a notion related to marriage customs in the Middle East. The phrase in question reads in the source texts as follows: "Wa hum qādiyyn qālat lahum wāhdah sit ānna al 'uzūmah 'ashān ibnahā 'āīz ytjawaz."[478] With the underlined part in the English indicating the explanatory addition added by Cobham, it is translated as follows: "sitting there some women said to them that the sheika was having the party because her son the sheikh wanted to get married and it was a way of having a look at the likely candidates."[479] By adding the explanatory clause, Cobham allows the English reader to reach the exact internationality of Zahra's portrayal of the life in the Gulf and its customs.

Interestingly, and arguably paradoxically, Cobham herself referred at a major conference that in translating *Only in London* from Arabic into English she had to change various words (in reference to the prostitute character in the novel) to conform to the standards of politeness in the host (English) culture.[480] It is this liberty in bringing the text closer to the English reader, together with Cobham's vast knowledge of Arab culture and her experience in translation, which provides a further chance for al-Shaykh's work to be fully appreciated.

Although the comparative analysis of source text and target text is an important approach to understanding the ideology involved in the translation, I have opted not to follow this form of analysis. As I have followed a socio-linguistic approach, rather than

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[478] Al-Shaykh, Women of Sand and Myrrh, 9.
[479] Ibid., 25.
[480] "BRISMES", (Middle East Studies Association) Edinburgh 2001.

a linguistic appraoch, I have concentrated on the social and cultural factors affecting the choice of translation, thus placing a larger emphasis on the role of the reviewer and the critic in the reception of a literary work. Focusing on the role of both the reviewer and critic has, in my view, not been fully addressed insofar as the reception of Arabic literature in the West is concerned.

4.7.2 The Role of Academia

As argued in Chapter II, the inclusion of an Arab woman writer's text as part of a reading list of an academic course dealing with women's studies can be argued to play an important role in helping that writer to gain access to a Western literary system. Indeed, the education system with its canonising power, has a central role to play in popularising works of literature and, in the case of translated works, stimulating an interest in the literature of the other cultures.

As also noted in Chapter II, book reading and conferences organised by academics are also important tools through which an author may be further exposed to a literary system. Their value for translated literature is that they provide the author with an exposure to a mass readership through accessing large numbers of students who then spread awareness of an author or a specific text by word of mouth. Conferences, attended by members of the academic world, as well as outside categories of expertise such as commentators who help to ensure the appearance of the author in subsequent

reviews in literary journals, all help an author gain access to both the academic and non-academic part of a literary system. For an example is al-Shaykh's presence at the "International Writers Series, 1999-2000", which included a number of lectures, readings and class visits, and through which Sweet Briar College brought writers from all around the world to the attention of students. Al-Shaykh contributed herself, gave a lecture entitled "The New Scheherazade" and read abstracts of her works.

As in the case of el-Saadawi, feminist academic interest in al-Shaykh's work constitutes a form of patronage that has facilitated her assimilation into the host culture and has helped the author to generate an increased readership. Feminist interest in the topic of war led to an inclusion of al-Shaykh's work in a conference dedicated exclusively to that topic, the Second Biennial Feminism(s) and Rhetoric(s) Conference entitled "Challenging Rhetorics: Cross-Disciplinary Sites of Feminist Discourse". Through a paper presented by Alicia Alexander entitled "Women's Art in Lebanon After the Civil War", al-Shaykh's work was included in the body of the conference alongside works of other Lebanese female writers.

4.8 Al-Shaykh's presence in the West

Al-Shaykh lives in London and is actively involved in the literary scene in the UK. I would argue that this is a significant factor in explaining her success in the Western literary market in general. This view is apparent in Zelfa Hourani's argument that one of the difficulties in marketing the work of Arab writers is that it is not easy to reach

them. When journalists from newspapers, television and radio stations fail to contact the authors, Hourani believes that the "marketing of the book is cut short". In an interview conducted with Zelfa Hourani in 2002 for the purpose of this thesis, I asked her why she thought al-Shaykh's work was successful in translation. She answered that "al-Shaykh was in the right place at the right time" and added that in the 1980s there were rarely any Arab women writers living in London. She said that al-Shaykh was an exception and she had written an interesting novel, *The Story of Zahra*. For Hourani, al-Shaykh knows how to present herself to the press, moves in literary circles and is successful in marketing herself in general. A willingness to do this is essential for any author who wishes to gain the necessary publicity for success. According to Hourani, "successful media publicity needs the presence of the author for interviews, book signing, etc".[481]

4.9 Conclusion

In this chapter I have set out several factors of varying importance that can be taken to explain al-Shaykh's success in penetrating the differentiated patronage system prevalent within Western literary systems. In the first instance I focused on the claim from some critics that al-Shaykh's popularity can be explained through her appeal to the Orientalist discourse. Although it is certain that the Western media repeatedly seized on themes from the Orientalist lexicon that are all too familiar: seclusion, the veil and "women of Arabia", I have argued that al-Shaykh's female protagonists and the themes they bring to

[481] Margaret Obank, "Short stories by men a kiss of death," interview with Zelfa Hourani, *Banipal*, no.2. (June 1998): 78.

life are worthy of a deeper and more complex analysis. In addition to its obvious appeal to the Orientalist discourse, her work has also attracted a significant feminist appreciation. Al-Shaykh's appeal to the feminist genre comes as no surprise as the vast majority of her characters display strong feminist attributes, striving to make a difference in their own lives in spite of the patriarchal order under which they live. Secondly, al-Shaykh addresses key topics of interest to feminists such as sexuality and women's experience in war, which provides an environment in which traditional social roles have collapsed, allowing her female protagonists to take on roles previously disallowed by traditional society and to aspire for self-fulfilment. Finally, her stylistic use of writing in the first person narrative, a typical feminist writing technique, has proved to have particular appeal to feminist critics. Despite al-Shaykh's obvious appeal to the feminist critique, it is important to acknowledge the she does not recognise herself to be a feminist writer, and, in contrast to her Orientalist reception, her reviewers' have not capitalised on the feminist interest in her work.

It is evident however, that one needs to look further than ideology in order to fully understand al-Shaykh's reception. Other factors have proved to be of significance: for example, al-Shaykh's work has attracted the attention of the Arab Western Diaspora communities, people who may be interested in novels coming out of the Arab world, and this has created a significant market for her books. Her latest novel in particular deals with issues of identity which I believe to be a major topic of interest to people living away from their country of ethnic origin. Furthermore, political events have proved to be a factor in enhancing interest in al-Shaykh's work. The Lebanese Civil War created a

wide and varied interest in her *oeuvre* and the First Gulf War in turn generated an even greater Western interest in the Arab world (and in her work as a result). In terms of the latter conflict, al-Shaykh's publishers capitalised on this political interest with the publication of *Women of Sand and Myrrh,* and this established her name as a successful author in terms of her marketability.

Undoubtedly al-Shaykh's appeal to such a diverse readership as outlined above - combined with her presence in the UK – has contributed to her marketability in the West. This success is largely manifested in al-Shaykh having her latest work published by a mainstream publishing company – a sign that I believe indicates the true success of a translated Arab author.

Chapter 5 - Sahar Khalifa

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will explore the success of the Palestinian writer Sahar Khalifa in the Western literary system. In contrast to Chapter III, I will argue that there is little evidence to suggest that Orientalist discourse had an impact on her success in the West and that although I consider feminist discourse to be part of the explanation, it played a minor role compared with the role it played in relation to al-Skayhk's reception. Thus I will argue that neither Khalifa's readership nor her patrons were influenced to any significant extent by either of these two ideologies. Instead I will argue that it is political factors that played a major role in explaining Khlaifa's success and, paradoxically, also her failure.

I will begin with a review of Khalifa's life and writings (section 5.2). Having looked at the fact that her success in the Western literary system was limited to the publication of her novel *Wild Thorns* (section 5.3), I will argue that it is the very political nature of the book, as reflected accurately in the reviews, that explains why she found no further success with either mainstream or academic Western readers (section 5.4). In so doing, I will conclude, following Jauss, that although political factors can be a, and even *the*, crucial factor in ensuring that a translated work attracts a significant readership, this is not sufficient to maintain an author's success over time.

5.2 Overview of Khalifa's life and writings

5.2.1 Her life

Sahar Khalifa is one of Palestine's foremost novelists, widely acclaimed as the first feminist Palestinian writer and as influential in Palestinian literature as Ghassan Kanafani and Jabra Ibrahim Jabra have been.

Khalifa was born in 1941 in Nablus. In 1959 she completed her secondary education at Rosary College in Jordan. Major reviews of her life describe her matrimony in the same year as a traditionally arranged marriage, which according to Khalifa involved thirteen years of "frustration and disappointments".[482]

Khalifa ended her marriage through divorce and decided to dedicate herself to writing. She completed her BA in English Literature at BirZeit University in Ramallah, Palestine. In 1980 she obtained a Fulbright Scholarship to US where she completed an MA in English Literature at the University of North Carolina Chapel-Hill. In 1988 she obtained her Ph.D. in Women's Studies and American literature from the University of Iowa. Following her studies, she returned to Palestine where she established the Women's Affairs Centre in Nablus, which opened a branch in Gaza City in 1991 and in Amman in 1994.

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[482] Salma Jayyusi Khadra, ed. *Anthology of Modern Palestenian Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 101.

Khalifa has achieved recognition as an acclaimed writer both in the Western world and in the Arab world. Most of her novels have been translated into many languages. In the Arab world, her works have been reviewed and analysed in various books and literary articles. Known both in her actual and literary life as one of only a few Palestinian feminists, Khalifa portrays her belief in women's rights and the necessity of advocating the notion of feminist consciousness as an integral part of Palestinian political consciousness.

5.2.2 Her writing

Khalifa is a feminist writer who believes that writing is a duty she owes to her people and gender. She writes to narrate and document the suffering of the Palestinian people and to show the dilemmas faced by Palestinian women in terms of the conflict between their traditional role in Arab society and the more active role they play in facing the occupation. The twin strands of feminism and nationalism run uncompromisingly through her writing. In other words, Khalifa focuses in her writing on all the forces limiting Palestinian women's abilities, talents, freedom, consciousness and life.

5.2.2.1 *We Are Not Your Slave Girls Anymore*[483]

[483] *Lam na 'ud jawārī lakum!* Bayrūt: Dār al-ādāb, 1988.

Khalifa's first novel *We Are Not Your Slave Girls Anymore* depicts the lives of middle-class Palestinians before the Israeli Occupation of 1967. Because of its advocacy of women's rights, the novel made a strong impact in her own community. It was made into a radio and TV series in 1977. Khalifa deals with the dilemma of Palestinian women, forced to balance resisting and surviving the Occupation against having to live under culturally traditional if not oppressive roles. Her writing highlights the frustration that flows from this balancing act, which is compounded by the fact that the role played by women in the first *Intifada* remains politically unrecognised. In an interview with *The Middle East Magazine* she discussed her 1991 novel *Bab al Saha* (which French critics hailed as a classic of Arab feminist literature[484]), stating that "my book tells the secrets, the hidden levels of a women's oppression. On the one hand the Palestinian woman is required to play the role of the liberator, on the other hand she is asked to continue to play that traditional cultural role she has played for centuries".[485]

5.2.2.2 *Sunflower*[486]

Another of Khalifa's novels to which I will refer only briefly (on the basis that it has not been translated into English) is *Sunflower*. Cooke included it in her

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[484] Chris Kutschera, "Palestine: The Aftermath of the (frist) Intifada," *The Middle East Magazine,* (September, 1997) http://chris-kutshera.com/A/Sahar%20khalifa.htm

[485] Ibid. *Bab al Saha* was translated into French and published by Flammarion Press. During the Palestinian Week organized by the Paris-based Institute of the Arab World, it was presented at the Institute's Arab book fair. More recently, some of her novels have been translated into German for the Frankfort Book Fair in 2004, which hosted Arabic literature as its main theme.

[486] '*Abbad al-shams* The novel has been translated into Dutch (1986), French (1988) and German (1990). *'Abbād al-Shams : Takmilat al- Ṣabbār.* 3 ed. Bayrūt: Dār al-ādāb, 1987.

analysis of Arab women's writers in *Women and The War Story*[487] and highlights Khalifa's concern with the literary documentation of the role Palestinian women played in the first *Intifada.* Having learned from the experience of the Algerian Revolution, were women's participation in the national struggle against the French was not subsequently rewarded in political terms.

5.2.2.3 *Memoirs of an Unrealistic Woman*

Another novel that has confirmed Khalifa's feminist standing in the West is *Memoirs of an Unrealistic Woman.* It can be argued that the publication of this work in French confirmed Khalifa as a serious player within the feminist arena in the minds of French critics.

The novel has been translated into Italian and German (both 1995), but has not been published in full in English. However, a fragment of the novel appeared in Jayyusi's *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature.*[488] It has also been analysed in Cooke's *Gendering War Talk*[489] and *Women and the War Story*[490]. Both Jayussi and Cooke highlight Khlaifa's deeply-held belief in the role played by women's awakening and resistance to oppressive, traditional roles as an integral part of the wider political Palestinian struggle.

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[487] Miriam Cooke, *Women and the War Story* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 180.
[488] Jayyusi, 589.
[489] Miriam Cooke and Angela Woollacott, *Gendering War Talk* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993).
[490] Miriam Cooke, *Women and the War Story*..

Through the characters of the book, Khalifa seeks to extend Palestinians criticism of the Occupation to a process by which Palestinian women critically assess the way they accept the traditional social modes of oppression in which they live. Afaf, the protagonist, highlights the role and social expectations that constrain women in Palestinian society. She thereby voices Khalifa's call for a pursuit of self-consciousness in order to overcome social boundaries and to participate in the national struggle for liberation. Khalifa wrote *Memoirs of an Unrealistic Woman* in the six months immediately following her completion of *Sunflower* in 1979, but did not publish the novel until six years later, on the eve of the first *Intifada* in 1987.[491]

5.3 Khalifa's *Wild Thorns*[492]

In this section I will briefly look at the English translation of Khalifa's novel *Wild Thorns* which appeared in 1995 (section 5.3.1) I will then turn to why I believe this novel found success in the West (section 5.3.2) after which I will set out a number of reasons why one would expect that Khalifa would have secured further interest by publishers as a result of her initial success (Section 5.3.3). This will lead up to my analysis in section 5. 4 of the possible explanations as to why her success with *Wild Thorns* did not lead to further interest in her work.

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[491] Ibid., 314.

[492] *Al-Subar,* 1978 Published in the UK by al-Saqi in 1985 and in the US by New York, Olive Branch Press, 1989. *al-Ṣubbār*. 3 ed. Bayrūt: Dār al-ādāb, 1987.

5.3.1 The appearance of *Wild Thorns* in English

The translation of *Wild Thorns* was the starting point for Khalifa's international literary recognition. It is her only novel to be translated into English. It was published by al-Saqi and was supported by the Project of Translation for Arabic Literature (*PROTA*), a Palestinian initiative founded and directed by Salma Khadra Jayyusi. The organization aims to help Palestinian texts gain access to the US literary market, and more broadly aims to provide a wide selection of translations from Arabic that reflect the diversity and richness of Arabic literary culture in general and Palestinian literature in particular.

Khalifa initially encountered difficulties in publishing the novel in the Arab world. Both Lebanese and Palestinian publishers found there were too many risks inherent in publishing it.[493] An Egyptian publisher rejected the novel on the basis that he felt that the novel had no distinguishing feature to indicate that it had been written by a woman, a marketing prerequisite.[494] The novel was first published by a joint Israeli-French publishing house, resulting in the book appearing simultaneously in Arabic, Hebrew and French in 1976.[495]

Translated into English by Trevor LeGassick and Elizabeth Fernea, the novel addresses a number of issues. The degree of feminist consciousness is far more subtle in comparison with that in her other novels. The novel mostly praised in the West for its

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[493] Cooke, *Women and The War Story,* 336.
[494] Peter Clark. "Contemporary Arabic literature in English." *The Linguist* 36, no 4. 1997.
[495] Cooke, *Women and The War Story*, 313.

vivid portrayal of the lives of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories and for its depiction of the strong divisions in the Palestinian debates about resistance to Occupation and about the question of labouring in Israel.

In the West, Khalifa is known mainly on account of this novel, although extracts from her other works have been presented in journals or academic books.[496] None of her novels that followed *Wild Thorns* have been published in English translation and are therefore unavailable to a general readership.

5.3.2 Reasons for success of *Wild Thorns*

There are two main reasons for the success of *Wild Thorns*: firstly the skill with which the Arabic was translated into English; and secondly the striking political context in which it is set.

First, for many, Khalifa's translators produced a translation that could be defined as "easy read" in terms of the needs of the Western host culture's readership. The novel was well received by critics as an easy-to-read work for English readers. On the blurb of the jacket we read the following commendation:

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[496] Examples of such minor translations of Khalifa's work in journals or academic books are as follows: fragments of her novel *Memoirs of an Unrealistic Woman* (translated by Salwa Jabsheh and Christopher Tingley) are available in Jayussi's *Anthropology of Palestinian writers* (1992) translations (often by Cooke herself) of fragments of various novels can be found in Cooke's critical works *Women and the War Story* (1996), 9-313 and *Gendering War Talk* (1993), 93-196. In addition, an extract from her latest novel *The Inheritance* was presented in the Journal *Banipal* as part of a panoramic overview of Palestinian literature. (Autumn 2002/ Spring 2003, No 15/16), 25.

> Despite many seemingly unbridgeable cultural differences, the translator has successfully conveyed in readable English the flavour of the Palestinian idiom and sense of humour as well as the Palestinian determination to survive![497]

As we saw in chapter 2, translators are often involved in "domestication" i.e. adapting a piece of writing to the linguistic and cultural demands of the reader. The broader literary culture demands that it's reading tastes be accommodated: it does not want to be distracted by unfamiliar language. For a foreign text to be described as an "easy-read" is therefore a major factor in facilitating the acceptance of such a work by critics and the readership. The value of such translations is noted in one of the readers' reviews of *Wild Thorns* posted on Amazon.com, which expresses appreciation of the translation: "*Wild Thorns* is well worth reading. The translation comes across well. It does not sound stale like many translations of Arabic literature can be."[498]

Second, *Wild Thorns* is set in a striking political context, namely that of the first Palestinian *Intifada,* which was seized upon by professional reviews and which naturally attracted a wide readership. Prior to the outbreak of the *Intifada* in December 1987, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict had been presented by the US media to the US public in a way that was not particularly sympathetic to the Palestinians side. However for many, the *Intifada* undoubtedly reflected the struggle of a weak party against a stronger party and consequently any portrayal of that struggle would inevitably have led to an opening

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[497] Khalifa, *Wild Thorns.*
[498] "A Beautiful Written Portrayal of A Brutal Situation", reader's review of *Wild Thorns*, by Sahar Khalifa, 25 June 25,1999.

of American readers' eyes to a new perspective on the conflict. Consequently, I would argue that the novel's popularity in the US relates to the fact that it presented to the American readers a perspective of the *Intifada* that was different to the perspective they had become accustomed to in the US media. By the end of the 1990s and into the new millennium, readers were still drawing attention to the political value the text holds for them, a view reflected by many reader's reviews of the work on Amazon.com, written and posted between 1999 to 2003. For many readers, it seems that the main value of the text is the window it opens to various aspects of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and undoubtedly the outbreak of the second *Intifada* in 2000 contributed to a revival of such interest. For example, following from the title "Truth is only one but there are many versions of it", a reviewer writes:

> Even for those persons with strong opinions about the conflict between Palestine and Israel or with those like me who truly do not know what comes first, the egg or the chicken, this book will open their eyes to the real nature of every conflict.[499]

One reader who appears to hold a biased view against the Palestinians, on the basis of his surprise that "they (the Palestinians) are people too", also values the work as it allows one to come away "with an enriched understanding of the other side"[500]

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[499] Juan Carlos, "Truth is only one but there are many version of it" reader's review of Wild Thorns, by Sahar Khalifa, 12 December 2000 Columbia. www.amazon.com.

[500] Under the title "An invitation to sit at a Palestinian dinner table", another reader writes as follows: Guess what? Palestinians are people, too. If that Sentence makes you angry, then you probably would not want to read this book… but if your are willing to read with an open mind, you may come away from this book with an enriched understanding of the other side. One of the great functions of literature is to let the reader walk in another's shoes. That is what I had in mind when I chose to read this book. I have not been disappointed. Milpitas, USA 12 July 2003

No doubt the powerful representation of the reality of day to day life under occupation and the depth of its analysis would render Khalifa's literary work of interest to those concerned with having a deeper understanding of the live's of Palestinians. Under the title "Understand the Realities", another reader writes:

> I have always had my doubts as to how to categorize in my mind those Palestinians referred to as "Arab-Israelis" and those who accept to work in Israel. With this book I have learned of total ignorance on the subject of occupation, and Ms. Khalifa has taught me a valuable lesson: it is impossible to draw this conflict in black and white.[501]

I consider that the focus and acknowledgment of these readers on Khalifa's ability to provide a deep and engaging analysis of the situation in Palestine reflects a vacuum for background and depth of information in the discussion of the Israeli-Palestinian issue, which the work seemed to fill. This surely highlights the role political events play in engaging readers with works that otherwise would not have been of interest. As a readership's interest in literary works may well primarily be shaped by the force of political events, *Wild Thorns* can be argued to be a prime example of Segers' notion of a political event or context triggering literary interest.

5.3.3 Reasons why to expect further success post *Wild Thorns*

In light of the four main factors referred to in chapter II, it would be natural to have expected *Wild Thorns* to lead to further literary success for Khalifa in the West.

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[501] "Understand the Realities," reader's review of *Wild Thorns*, by Sahar Khalifa, 15 April 2001. www.amazon.com

Firstly, as we have seen, the translators of her work were praised for having produced an easy-to-read text and this in itself would be a strong reason to expect publishers to commission further works and translations. Secondly, *Wild Thorns* gained a readership on both sides of the Atlantic which, as argued by Sutherland, would normally spell significant future success for an author on the basis that access to the large and lucrative US market should increase the author's popularity with British publishers. Thirdly, as argued by Shiffron, once the marketability and integrity of an author has been established through his or her first publication, their subsequent work is likely to be none popular with publishers than that of an unknown author. Finally, the novel gained significant academic literary recognition. It also appeared on several academic reading lists for courses that ranged from those of a feminist nature through courses and books looking at Arab literature (either as literature per se or as an introduction to Middle Eastern culture) to courses concerned specifically with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its presentation in cultural forms.[502] As discussed in chapter II, in relation to Sutherland's argument, appearing on college or university reading lists brings an author both recognition and the credibility of belonging to a canonised genre, and as a result this establishes a name for the author amongst publishers and readers.

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[502] Joe Cleary deals in his book, *Literature, Partition and the Nation State: Culture and Conflict in Ireland, Israel and Palestine, with Wild Thorns*. 2002:.8-89. Joe Clearly, *Literature, Partition and the Nation of State: Culture and Conflict in Ireland. Israel and Palestine* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

I will now turn to the reasons why I think Khalifa failed to capitalise on this favourable position and why no further texts of hers were translated into English.

5.4 Reasons why Khalifa was not published after *Wild Thorns*

In this section I will set out a number of reasons why I believe Khalifa was not able to secure second or further publications in English, namely on the basis that *Wild Thorns* is a political novel, had limited reception by a left-wing audience and finally does not fall within the dominant entertainment genre.

5.4.1 *Wild Thorns* as a political book and the consequences

Wild Thorns is essentially a political novel with very little feminist value added and as such it was always going to be of interest to the "left" or "liberal" audience, written as it is by a female Palestinian dealing with the Palestinian struggle. This is reflected both in the content of reviews which automatically placed Khalifa into a left-wing political pigeon hole and in the fact that those reviews were limited to specialist journals.

In most reviews, the novel is principally celebrated for its vivid depiction of Palestinian lives under the Israeli occupation. Issa J. Boullata regards the work as "the best ever to portray everyday life of Arabs in the Israeli occupied West Bank".[503] Priya Lothe writes that "Khalifeh depicts, through her characters, a wide range of dilemmas, perspectives

[503] Issa J. Boullata, *The Middle East Journal,* 1988.

and methods of coping with the suffering and humiliation of occupation".[504] Mary Ann Fay writes that "through her characters, Khalifa exposes the oppressive nature of the Israeli occupation."[505]

In addition, these reviewers have rightly given attention to other social issues related to Palestinians' lives which are portrayed in the novel, such as "the dependence of Palestinians on work in Israeli industry and the opposition this provokes among other Palestinians who consider them traitors for supporting their own oppressors".[506] Even journals devoted to women's writing, such as *Belles Lettres*, focused on these political and social issues.

Khalifa's *Wild Thorns* was hardly reviewed in mainstream literary reviews, particularly in the UK. [507] Apart from the *New Statesman* and the *Kirkus Review,* the novel has been reviewed mainly in specialised literary journals.[508] These journals fall into four categories: publications dealing with gender studies including, *Women's Review of Books*, those which specialise in Middle Eastern politics and culture including *Middle East Journal* and *Middle East Policy,* journals of literary criticism such as *Belles Lettres* and *World Literature Today* and political outlets such as *The Daily Star.*

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[504] Priya Lothe, *Middle East Policy* I, (1992), 171, 171-178.
[505]Mary Ann Fay, *Belles Lettres,* 1990.
[506] Lothe, P. *Middle East Policy* , 171.
[507] The only UK review I came across was in the *Morning Star* cited by Saqi Books Publishers website. "synopsis" review of *Wild Thorns.* http://www.saqibooks.com.
[508] *New Statesman* 110, 1985, *Middle East Journal 5*, Spring 1988, *Middle East Policy* 3, 1992, *Belles Letters*- Sum'91, vol 6 and spring'90, vol 5) and *World Literature Today*-spring'00, vol 74). *Morning Star* is a British Marxist daily newspaper renowned for its interest in Third World social and political issues.

In arguing above that the success of *Wild Thorns* can be attributed to its striking political setting and its political appeal for Western readers, I have stressed the aspect of Reception Theory that looks at how a reader's horizons of expectation can at times be dominated by political events and literary interest. Implicit in this analysis is that although such interest in political events will generally be circumscribed by a culture's overall ideological discourse, such interest may not necessarily fit well or at all with a dominant discourse, as noted above in relation to the US context of reception of the book. In such case, a political novel's success can be explained purely in terms of Jauss' notion of novelty as developed by Segers who, as we saw in chapter II, stressed that literature may attract readers for its original political and cultural content.

However, the downside of this novelty factor for political texts is that once the novelty has worn off, the writer has to draw upon other elements that underpin a readership's interest and it is here that the political nature of *Wild Thorns* placed Khalifa at a disadvantage. More specifically, I would argue that there are two main consequences of an author being associated with political themes.

(i) Main stream versus left publishing power

If the author's political persuasion, as defined in Western terms of 'left' and 'right' (in the case of the UK) or 'liberal' and 'conservative' (in the case of the US), is on the 'left'

or 'liberal' side, an author will find it extremely hard to gain access to mainstream publishing houses.[509]

In addition to this broad political reality affecting the Western literary system, it is also important to note that attempts at promoting Arab literature in particular come with their own difficulties. In an interview with Jayyusi, founder and director of PROTA, Louise Werner reports Jayyusi's assertion that "finding a commercial publisher's willing to accept her manuscripts has been difficult".[510] This, according to Jayyusi, is due to the "wall publishers and reviewers have built" against Arab culture. The restraint in reference to Arab culture derives, she believes, from their fear of "giving offence to someone if they bring it out".[511]

A further example relating to Macmillan Press can help to develop this idea further. Macmillan recently came under pressure to withdraw Elizabeth Laird's novel *A Little Piece of Ground:* "Macmillan has received three demands for the book to be pulped, and many bookshops are worried about stocking it, lest it provoke further protests form Jewish groups".[512] The novel deals with the life of a 12 year old Palestinian boy growing up in the midst of the second *Intifada* on the West Bank. Opponents of the book claim

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[509] Schiffrin, Director of The New Press, argues that throughout the western publishing industry the tendency is to select works from authors from the right: "Left-of-centre books are now primarily published by small independent and alternative houses, such as Beacon, South End and others". (Schiffrin, 32.) In his article 'The Corporatisation of Publishing', Translated works, like other books in a peripheral position within the Anglophone literary system, usually face the same limitation in that they are published by small or specialised press publishers. Ibid., 32.

[510] Louise Werner, "A Gathere of Arab voices," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 3 August 1989.

[511] Ibid.

[512] "Children's author faces Jewish wrath", *The Guardian,* August 23, 2003:1-5. Another article was published in *The Guardian* on the translation of Laird's novel under the title: "Through the eyes of a Palestinian child," August 26,2003.

that it promotes anti-Semitism, when in reality it is nothing more than a 'slice of life'.[513] In the light of the pressures faced by Laird's novel we can understand Jayyusi's difficulties in promoting Palestinian literature and Khalifa's difficulties in securing publication in the West. A full analysis of the influence of Jewish pressure is beyond the scope of my thesis but I intend to research the issue further in future studies.

(ii) Competing with dominant entertainment genre

The second consequence of the political nature of the book as reflected in its reviews which, furthermore, are limited to narrow outlets is that it may also have severely restricted the author's chances of being perceived by publishers to be an author who writes novels for the personal entertainment of a broad readership, which is today's favoured form of the novel. Publishers are aware that a piece of political writing that attempts to broaden a reader's horizon of expectation always has to compete with the dominant market of the entertainment novel, which, as discussed in chapter II, is the dominant genre in the Western market, giving rise as it does to the greatest financial profit in Western literary systems. Thus, the political novel has to compete with Lefevere's economic form of conceptual patronage.

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[513] Ibid.1

This reality of the publishing world is reflected in some commentators' conscious avoidance of representing Arab female novels as political in nature.[514] They are aware of the danger of presenting any piece of Arab literature as part of a pedagogic didactic committed genre which by its very nature doesn't fall into the category of popular literary genre. They thereby seek to prevent a new novel from being received as merely an anthropological work.

For example, in the introduction to a double issue of *Banipal,* entitled 'Feature on Palestinian Literature', Margaret Obank, publisher and editor of the magazine, writes:

> In this feature readers will mark that most authors write of issues in their lives, of distress and grief … of emotional and mental suffering, in entirely original, artistic and literary ways. There is no literature of 'commitment', of resistance' or 'social realism' from these writers. They are writing first and foremost because they are writers and poets.[515]

Similarly, in her introduction to *The Anthropology of Modern Palestinian Literature,* Jayyusi emphasises that it is the richness of the aesthetics of Palestinian literature, rather than its political dimension, that makes it valuable literature. As Hassan notes, Jayyusi insists on the ability of Palestinian literature to rise above politics. According to Jayyusi, "art has its own internal laws of growth and development".[516]

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[514] Dr Rooke, a major translator of Arabic literature into Swedish, argues that "it does not matter whether it is Palestinian literature or literature from any other world scene, if it is treated as a socio-political document, this will always have an alienating effect on the reading public who is looking for art". Private letter to author, 5 February 2005.
[515] Margert Obank, *Banipal* (Autumn 2002/Spring 2003), 2.
[516] Jayyusi, 1.

Jayyusi argues that what is involved in Palestinian literature, "would lose its immense value if restricted to polemical narrations or to propaganda, and [that] perhaps the greatest achievement of contemporary Palestinian poetry is its subtle and aesthetically sophisticated portrayal of genuine existential situations."[517]

Another example of the importance of considering the host culture's expectations when presenting or selecting a translated work can be found in the *Anthropology of Modern Palestinian Literature*. Jayyusi selected *Memoirs of an Unrealistic Woman,* one of Khalifa's most feminist books, as a representative piece of Khalifa's writing. To my mind, it would be fair to say that she could have selected *Wild Thorns* or *The Sunflower*, both of which deal with more social and economic issues, but she chose not to. Thus the choice might be taken as an attempt to draw attention to Palestinian women writers' concerns regarding issues of feminist aspirations, in addition to political themes, and to thereby slot them into the established confines of American feminist interest in Third World Literature. The underlying motivation for this might be both ideological, i.e. staying true to the classical themes in which Western feminists are interested, and financial, i.e. ensuring that the Anthology sold as many copies as possible. My own view is that Jayyusi was aware of what would sell and what would not sell in the American feminist market, and that in choosing a selection that would sell well she is above all demonstrating an interest in creating a broad audience for Palestinian literature.

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[517] Jayyusi, 71.

In summary, some of those who present literary works professionally, such as Jayyusi or Obank, are familiar with literary trends and are aware of the negative pitfalls that may distance the work from its potential readership. Thus, both the book's nature and the relatively limited number of reviews appearing in these specialist journals restricted exposure of *Wild Thorns* to a limited audience, and this is likely to have discouraged prospective publishers of further works of hers. As Sutherland notes, "publishers who want to stay in business have to answer to economic circumstances".[518] Or as Alfred Doblin put it, "the publisher casts one eye at the writer, the other at the public. But the third eye, the eye of wisdom, gazes unflinchingly at the cash register".[519]

5.5 Conclusion

The fortune of *Wild Thorns* therefore demonstrates that a particular socio-cultural horizon of expectation, in this case interest in a major Third World political event, can both enable publication and limit the continuous reception of a foreign author in the Western literary system. Addressing such a highly political and sensitive topic as the condition of the Palestinian people under the Israeli occupation meant that *Wild Thorns* attracted the attention of the academic world and public who were interested in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The *Intifada* had drawn the attention of the West to the realty of the conflict and generated an interest in looking for a deeper analysis. *Wild Thorns*

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[518] Sutherland, 38.
[519] Andre Shiffrin. "The business of Books: How International Conglomerates Took over Publishing and Changed the Way We Read." http://www.prospect.org/print/V12/2/stossel-.html

found this a fertile environment for creating a successful readership. In the same vein, US sponsorship of the Palestinian-Israeli peace-talks meant that there was space for literature as an introductory element into Palestinian society.

Although this political interest created a favourable condition for the novel's acceptance by Western literary systems, the same political element of her work ultimately limited her future success: publishers looking to back authors with a potential for wide circulation felt that Khalifa's appeal was too narrow, on the basis that her work does not fall within the genre of popular literature which is of interest to the general public, and subsequently publishers limited their attention to *Wild Thorns* only. Furthermore, the work provides an alternative view into the reality of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, contrary to the largely pro-Israeli view that had traditionally been held in the West. Therefore such work seemed not only to challenge an ideology entrenched in Western society but also presented a challenging situation for publishers. One can argue that major publishing companies are often reluctant to risk publishing works of limited marketability and which, moreover, have the potential to invite accusations that they are anti-Semitic on the basis of their support for a particular author. Small publishers, on the other hand, do not necessarily avoid such confrontation- but their sponsorship is not enough to make a long-lasting impact on the success of an author, as can be seen from the specialist company which published *Wild Thorns*.

Interestingly, Khalifa's various other works are highly feminist orientated and have been analysed by a few feminists specifically interested in the Middle East war story; one

might have expected that this would lead to further publications. However, feminism in itself can be argued to at times shy away from works which solely focus on the political, and, in addition, it may be argued that feminism itself is in decline. One can conclude that political events and politics *per se* constitute a factor that needs to be taken into consideration when analysing the receptive cultural environment of a translated literary work, but they cannot sustain a long-lasting interest in an author.

Thus it is striking that a translated work that has met a number of criteria essential for its success has not been guaranteed lasting and continued success, simply due to the fact that the work contradicted the demands of the popular market. In the case of *Wild Thorns*, the work was appraised for being easy to read and a well-translated novel. It had the support of an institutional body (PROTA), is listed on academic reading lists, received reviews (albeit in specialist journals) and, most importantly, it was published on both sides of the Atlantic – a prerequisite for further publishers' interest. However, the political nature of the book proved to outweigh all other factors, and as a result have cut off publishers' interest in her other work.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

In embracing the idea of the complexity of the reception process for foreign texts, I have looked at how Manipulation Theory encompasses the notion of ideology and discourse as key factors in explaining the fortunes of a translated text in a foreign literary system. I have set out how this theory relates a culture's dominant discourse and/or ideology to the various elements of a literary system and how it can thereby help to explain the fortunes of any book seeking to enter that system. I have referred to both Orientalism and feminism as examples of such ideologies and discourses. I have also looked at how economics as a form of patronage can play the dominant role in an author's reception.

Secondly, in placing Segers and Jauss' insights together, I have explained how political events can constitute a key factor in shaping or reinforcing a readership's preparedness to accept a foreign text. I have drawn upon this factor in the cases of all three writers covered.

Thirdly, through focusing on the reader's mind and its prejudices, and how a literary system takes this into account, I have looked at how both theories identify reviewers as key figures in explaining the fate of a text. I have looked at the role of reviews in order to give concrete examples of how this functions.

Lefevere's Manipulation Theory argues that the focus of the work of expertise, such as academics, is indicative of a culture's ideological trend. This has helped me both to locate academics within the theoretical model of a literary system and to use academic material as evidence of the prevalent ideological discourse surrounding the authors I have looked at.

Finally, in addition to these factors identified in the theory, reference should be made to two additional factors that the theory does not deal with and which I have argued affect the reception process of a text. They are the presence of an author in the host culture and their interaction with key actors in the literary circuit. For ease of reference, I would call these two factors "conjunctural factors".

Keeping in mind the potentially complex and nuanced interaction of these five factors and how they may affect the reception of a foreign text, I turned to three key Arab female writers to see which of these factors played a role in their reception, how, if at all, they interacted and how their emphasis may or may not have changed over time.

In the case of el-Saadawi, I have identified a number of factors I believe have contributed to the success of her work. Despite Orientalist discourse affecting her reception right from the beginning, the dominant form of patronage throughout the 25 years of reception of her work in the West has been feminism, as reflected above all in the work of reviewers as a key category of expertise. In looking at the origins of this interest I have singled out a major political event, falling within Seger's model of the

socio-cultural horizon of expectation, as playing an important role. I have tried to show how the nature of the feminist reception to her work changed over time and reduced its Orientalist engagement. I have however stressed that it was indeed feminism that remained the backbone of her success. I have noted how at times two further categories of expertise made conscious choices about how to represent her work: commentators purposefully ignored or sidelined the political nature of her writings, and one of her translators purposefully adapted her writing. In both cases I have argued that they did so in the belief that it would broaden the appeal of her work for Western feminists. With respect to her continued successful reception in the West, I have shown how it was yet another category of expertise, feminist academics, who assured her ongoing success, and I have indicated that both her regular presence in the West and the ongoing force of her personality can be taken as factors in initiating and sustaining that academic interest in her work. Thus once the ideology of feminism had been engaged by her work, it was in fact the category of expertise of academics that was crucial for the maintenance of that success.

In the case of al-Shaykh, I noted six factors involved in her success. As with the later work of el-Saadawi, her work attracted above all an academic feminist response. As in the case of el-Saadawi, I also identified that Orientalist discourse was present in reviews of her work. Thus the same two forms of conceptual patronage that are at play in el-Saadawi's reception also played a role in the reception of al-Shaykh. In contrast to el-Saadawi, whose writing was published by publishing houses supporting her left-wing commentary or her feminist agenda, al-Shakyh's writing also appealed to non-feminist

readers and this attracted a mainstream publisher to support her work for what I argued was mainly financial reasons, thus bringing into play Lefevere's conceptual form of patronage labelled economics. As with el-Saadawi, major political events, attractive to readers' socio-cultural horizon of expectation, played an important part in harnessing interest in her work and, as with el-Saadawi again, I have argued that al-Shaykh's regular presence in the Western literary circuit helped her to maintain the interest of categories of expertise in her work. Finally, as in the case of el-Saadawi, I have looked at the way in which her translator tailored her work in a way that appealed to the horizon of expectation of her Western readership.

In the case of Khalifa, I have found a strong contrast to the factors affecting the first two writers. In contrast to the multi-faceted nature of their reception, Khalifa's success can be explained purely through Seger's socio-cultural horizon of expectation in that her one book to be translated into English was highly political in nature. Thus it was not the twin patronage of feminism and Orientalism that supported her, but rather the twin elements of the force of political interest surrounding the context in which the book was written on the one hand, and a publisher's economic interest in capturing a new audience on the other hand. I have gone on to argue that the political nature of this support also limited her success: neither her publisher nor any other publishers expressed interest in supporting more of her work because they viewed the novel on which her success was based to be a one-off book only of interest to a limited left-wing audience. Thus, as with al-Shaykh, it is Lefevere's conceptual form of patronage, labelled economics, which came to play the major role, although in Khalifa's case it led to an end to her success.

On the basis of my analysis of these writers I would argue the following conclusions can be reached about the factors that facilitate and hinder the reception of Arab female writing in the Western literary system.

Ideology is undoubtedly the most important factor in facilitating entry and sustained success. What is most apparent from looking into the various authors is the interchangeable and interacting nature of the factors involved in their success. Some factors are more prominent for one author and hardly effective for another, demonstrating that we need to look into each author individually and analyse the circumstances, events, ideologies that are most prominent at the time of that author.

I have highlighted the fact that most reviewers and critics did not extensively engage with the political, economic and anti-imperialist themes which have also marked el-Saadawi's oeuvre. In short, feminist reactions were selective, in line with the presupposition of feminist discourse – namely, a tendency to evacuate politics and the economony, and to focus too much on a narrow definition of gender.

What might be the larger significance of this thesis for debates about translation and reception in general, I have underlined that no monolithic explanation will surfice. The idea is to bolster readings of Edward Said which do not fall into this trap.Ultimately, such a reading point beyond the notion of nativism on the one side, and Eurocentrism on the other.

When it comes to political ideology, there is scope for further specific research in this area: as I have demonstrated, the contradiction between the political nature of Khalifa's work and what is deemed to be acceptable in the host culture has posed challenges to the further success of her works. In the case of el-Saadawi, her intention to address large segments of feminist ideology within the broader political economic framework contradicted the feminist tendency to evacuate politics and economics, and concentrate more on gender and sexuality. There is a clear distinction between political events and political ideology. Political events open a horizon of expectation and generate interest for a specific and often limited timeframe. Political ideology, on the other hand, determines the selection of which books are advanced within a literary system. This opens the question of the reception of the Arab political novel: given that it may clash with the host culture's dominant political ideology, it may either be ignored or rejected. I intend to explore this hypothesis further with other literary works within the political genre by male and female Arab authors.

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